aac Asimov YES! WITH A BANG!

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

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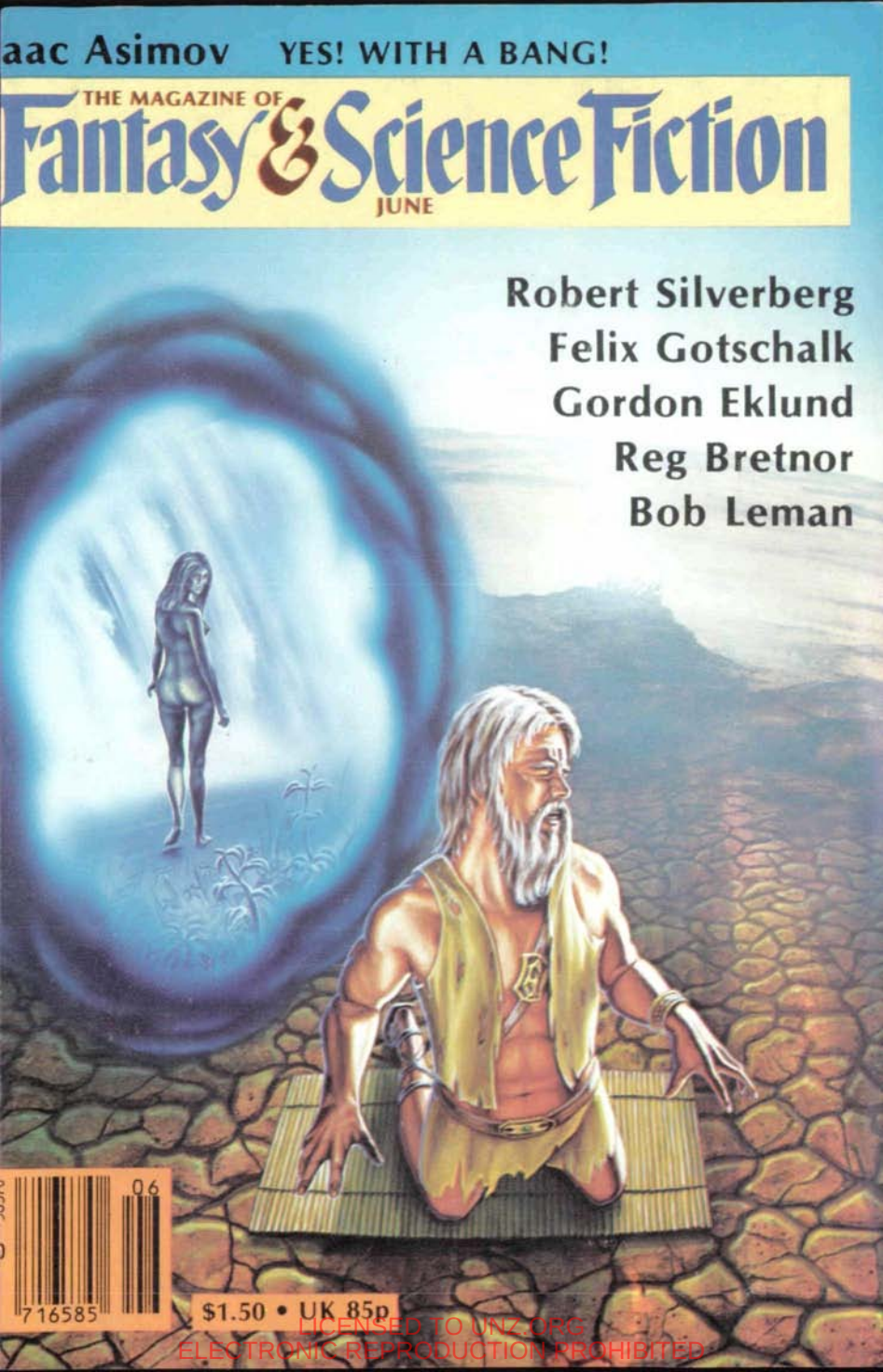

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Hitler Painted Roses. I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream. Jeffty Is Five. The Deathbird. "Repent, Harlequin!" Said The Ticktockman. A Boy And His Dog. Shatterday. The Beast That Shouted Love At The Heart Of The World. Paingod. The Prowler In The City At The Edge Of The World. Shattered Like A Glass Goblin. Grail. Strange Wine.

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JUNE • 32nd Year of Publication

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This new novella follows the adventures of Dekkeret, a young man in the Coronal's entourage, as he sets out on a hazardous massion to the barren continent of Suvrael. The story shares with Silverberg's novel LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE (Nov. 79-Jan. 80) the same background, the huge and wonderful planet of Majipoor, but this is a completely separate and independent tale. It will be published in book form (an illustrated, limited edition) by Underwood/Miller (239 N. 4th St., Columbia, Pa. 17512).

The Desert of Stolen

BY

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Suvrael lay like a glowing sword across the southern horizon — an iron band of dull red light, sending shimmering heat-pulsations into the air. Dekkeret, standing at the bow of the freighter on which he had made the long dreary sea journey, felt a quickening of the pulse. Suvrael at last! That dreadful place, that abomination of a continent, that useless and miserable land, now just a few days away, and who knew what horrors would befall him there? But he was prepared. Whatever happens, Dekkeret believed, happens for the best, in Suvrael as on Castle Mount. He was in his twentieth year, a big burly man with a short neck and enormously broad shoulders. This was the second summer of Lord Prestimion's glorious reign under the great Pontifex Confalume.

It was as an act of penance that Dekkeret had undertaken the voyage to the burning wastes of barren Suvrael. He had committed a shameful deed — certainly not intending it, at first barely realizing the shame of it — while hunting in the Khyntor Marches of the far northland, and some sort of expiation seemed necessary to him. That was in a way a romantic and flamboyant gesture, he knew, but he could forgive himself that. If he did not make romantic and flamboyant gestures at twenty, then when? Surely not ten or fifteen years from now, when he

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Dreams

was bound to the wheel of his destinies and had settled snugly in for the inevitable bland easy career in Lord Prestimion's entourage. This was the moment, if ever. So, then, to Suvrael to purge his soul, no matter the consequences.

His friend and mentor and hunting companion in Khyntor, Akbalik, had not been able to understand. But of course Akbalik was no romantic, and a long way beyond twenty, besides. One night in early spring, over a few flasks of hot golden wine in a rough mountain tavern, Dekkeret had announced his intention and Akbalik's response had been a blunt snorting laugh. "Suvrael?" he had cried. "You judge yourself too harshly. There's no sin so foul that it merits a jaunt in Suvrael."

And Dekkeret, stung, feeling patronized, had slowly shaken his head. "Wrongness lies on me like a stain. I'll burn it from my soul under the hotland sun."

"Make the pilgrimage to the Isle instead, if you need to do something. Let the blessed Lady heal your spirit."

"No. Suvrael."

"Why?"

"To suffer," said Dekkeret. "To take myself far from the delights of Castle Mount, to the least pleasant place on Majipoor, to a dismal desert of fiery winds and loathsome dangers. To mortify the flesh, Akbalik, and show my contrition. To lay upon myself the discipline of discomfort and even pain — *pain*, do you know what that is? — until I can forgive myself. All right?"

Akbalik, grinning, dug his fingers into the thick robe of heavy black Khyntor furs that Dekkeret wore. "All right. But if you must mortify, mortify thoroughly. I assume you'll not take this from your body all the while you're under the Suvraelu sun."

Dekkeret chuckled. "There are limits," he said, "to my need for discomfort." He reached for the wine. Akbalik was nearly twice Dekkeret's age, and doubtless found his earnestness funny. So did Dekkeret, to a degree; but that did not swerve him.

"May I try once more to dissuade you?"

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"Pointless."

"Consider the waste," said Akbalik anyway. "You have a career to look after. Your name is frequently heard at the Castle now. Lord Prestimion has said high things of you. A promising young man, due to climb far, great strength of character, all that kind of noise. Prestimion's young; he'll rule a long while; those who are young in his early days will rise as he rises. And here you are, deep in the wilds of Khyntor playing when you should be at court, and already planning another and more reckless trip. Forget this Suvrael nonsense, Dekkeret, and return to the Mount with me. Do the Coronal's bidding, impress the great ones with your worth, and build for the future. These are wonderful times on Majipoor, and it will be splendid to be among the wielders of power as things unfold. Eh? Eh? Why throw yourself away in Suvrael? No one knows of this — ah — *sin* of yours, this one little lapse from grace—"

"*I* know."

"Then promise never to do it again, and absolve yourself."

"It's not so simple," Dekkeret said.

"To squander a year or two of your life, or perhaps lose your life entirely, on a meaningless, useless journey to—"

"Not meaningless. Not useless."

"Except on a purely personal level it is."

"Not so, Akbalik. I've been in touch with the people of the Pontificate and I've wangled an official appointment. I'm a mission of inquiry. Doesn't that sound grand? Suvrael isn't exporting its quota of meat and livestock and the Pontifex wants to know why. You see? I continue to further my career even while going off on what seems to you a wholly private adventure."

"So you've already made arrangements."

"I leave on Fourday next." Dekkeret reached his hand toward his friend. "It'll be at least two years. We'll meet again on the Mount. What do you say, Akbalik, the games at High Morpin, two years from Winterday?"

Akbalik's calm gray eyes fastened intently on Dekkeret's. "I will be there," he said slowly. "I pray that you'll be too."

That conversation lay only some months in the past; but to Dekkeret now, feeling the throbbing heat of the southern continent reaching toward him over the pale green water of the Inner Sea, it seemed incredibly long ago, and the voyage infinitely long. The first part of the journey had been pleasing enough — down out of the mountains to the grand metropolis of Nimoya, and then by riverboat down the Zimr to the port of Piliplok on the eastern coast. There he had boarded a freighter, the cheapest transport he could find, bound for the Suvraelu city of Tolaghai, and then it had been south and south and south all summer long, in a ghastly little cabin just downwind

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from a hold stuffed with bales of dried baby sea-dragons, and as the ship crossed into the tropics the days presented a heat unlike anything he had ever known, and the nights were little better; and the crew, mostly a bunch of shaggy Skandars, laughed at his discomfort and told him that he had better enjoy the cool weather while he could, for real heat was waiting for him in Suvrael. Well, he had wanted to suffer, and his wish was being amply granted already, and worse to come. He did not complain. He felt no regret. But his comfortable life among the young knights of Castle Mount had not prepared him for sleepless nights with the reek of sea-dragon in his nostrils like stilettos, nor for the stifling heat that engulfed the ship a few weeks out of Piliplok, nor for the intense boredom of the unchanging seascape. The planet was so impossibly *huge*, that was the trouble. It took forever to get from anywhere. Crossing from his native continent of Alhanroel to the western land of Zimroel had been a big enough project, overland to Alaisor from the Mount, then by sea to Piliplok and up the river into the mountain marches, but he had had Akbalik with him to lighten the time, and there had been the excitement of his first major journey, the strangeness of new places, new foods, new accents. And he had had the hunting expedition to look forward to. But this? This imprisonment aboard a dirty creaking ship stuffed with parched meat of evil odor? This interminable round of empty days without friends, without duties, without conversation? If only some monstrous sea-dragon would heave into view, he thought, and enliven the journey with a bit of peril; but no, no, the dragons in their migrations were elsewhere, one great herd said to be in western waters out by Narabal just now and another midway between Piliplok and the Rodamaunt Archipelago, and Dekkeret saw none of the vast beasts, not even a few stragglers. What made the boredom worse was that it did not seem to have any value as catharsis. He was suffering, true, and suffering was what he imagined would heal him of his wound, but yet the awareness of the terrible thing he had done in the mountains did not seem to diminish at all. He was hot and bored and restless, and guilt still clawed at him, and still he tormented himself with the ironic knowledge that he was being praised by no less than the Coronal Lord Prestimion for great strength of character while he could find only weakness and cowardice and foolishness in himself. Perhaps it takes more than humidity and boredom and foul odors to cure one's soul, Dekkeret decided. At any rate he had had more than enough of the process of getting to Suvrael, and he was ready to begin the next phase of his pilgrimage into the unknown.

2.

Every journey ends, even an endless one. The hot wind out of the south in-

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tensified day after day until the deck was too hot to walk and the barefoot Skandars had to swab it down every few hours; and then suddenly the burning mass of sullen darkness on the horizon resolved itself into a shoreline and the jaws of a harbor. They had reached Tolghai at last.

All of Suvrael was tropical; most of its interior was desert, oppressed perpetually by a colossal weight of dry dead air around the periphery of which searing cyclones whirled; but the fringes of the continent were more or less habitable, and there were five major cities along the coasts, of which Tolaghai was the largest and the one most closely linked by commerce to the rest of Majipoor. As the freighter entered the broad harbor Dekkeret was struck by the strangeness of the place. In his brief time he had seen a great many of the giant world's cities — a dozen of the fifty on the flanks of Castle Mount, and towering windswept Alaisor, and the vast astounding white-walled Ni-moya, and magnificent Piliplok, and many others — never had he beheld a city with the harsh, mysterious, forbidding look of this one. Tolaghai clung like a crab to a low ridge along the sea. Its buildings were flat, squat things of sun-dried orange brick, with mere slits for windows, and there were only sparse plantings around them, dismaying angular palms, mainly, that were all bare trunk with tiny feathery crowns far overhead. Here at midday the streets were almost deserted. The hot wind blew sprays of sand over the cracked paving-stones. To Dekkeret the city seemed like some sort of prison outpost, brutal and ugly, or perhaps a city out of time, belonging to some prehistoric folk of a regimented and authoritarian race. Why had anyone chosen to build a place so hideous? Doubtless it was out of mere efficiency, ugliness like this being the best way to cope with the climate of the land, but still, still, Dekkeret thought, the challenges of heat and drought might surely have called forth some less repellent architecture.

In his innocence Dekkeret thought he could simply go ashore at once, but that was not how things worked here. The ship lay at anchor for more than an hour before the port officials, three glum-looking Hjorts, came aboard. Then followed a lengthy business with sanitary inspections and cargo manifests and haggling over docking fees; and finally the dozen or so passengers were cleared for landing. A porter of the Ghayrog race seized Dekkeret's luggage and asked the name of his hotel. He replied that he had not booked one, and the reptilian-looking creature, tongue flickering and black fleshy hair writhing like a mass of serpents, gave him an icy mocking look and said, "What will you pay? Are you rich?"

"Not very. What can I get for three crowns a night?"

"Little. Bed of straw. Vermin on the walls."

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"Take me there," said Dekkeret.

The Ghayrog looked as startled as a Ghayrog is capable of looking. "You will not be happy there, fine sir. You have the bearing of lordship about you."

"Perhaps so, but I have a poor man's purse. I'll take my chances with the vermin."

Actually the inn turned out to be not as bad as he feared: ancient, squalid, and depressing, yes, but so was everything else in sight, and the room he received seemed almost palatial after his lodgings on the ship. Nor was there the reek of sea-dragon flesh here, only the arid piercing flavor of Suvraelu air, like the stuff within a flask that had been sealed a thousand years. He gave the Ghayrog a half-crown piece, for which he had not thanks, and unpacked his few belongings.

In late afternoon Dekkeret went out. The stifling heat had dropped not at all, but the thin cutting wind seemed less fierce now, and there were more people in the streets. All the same the city felt grim. This was the right sort of place for doing a penance. He loathed the blank-faced brick buildings, he hated the withered look of the landscape, and he missed the soft sweet air of his native city of Normork on the lower slopes of Castle Mount. Why, he wondered, would anyone choose to live here, when there was opportunity aplenty on the gentler continents? What starkness of the soul drove some millions of his fellow citizens to scourge themselves in the daily severities of life on Suvrael?

The representatives of the Pontificate had their offices on the great blank plaza fronting the harbor. Dekkeret's instructions called upon him to present himself there, and despite the lateness of the hour he found the place open, for in the searing heat all citizens of Tolaghai observed a midday closing and transacted business well into evening. He was left to wait a while in an antechamber decorated with huge white ceramic portraits of the reigning monarchs, the Pontifex Confalume shown in full face with a look of benign but overwhelming grandeur, and young Lord Prestimion the Coronal in profile, eyes aglitter with intelligence and dynamic energy. Majipoor was fortunate in her rulers, Dekkeret thought. When he was a boy he had seen Confalume, then Coronal, holding court in the wondrous city of Bombifale high up the Mount, and he had wanted to cry out from sheer joy at the man's calmness and radiant strength. A few years later Lord Confalume succeeded to the Pontificate and went to dwell in the subterranean recesses of the Labyrinth, and Prestimion had been made Coronal — a very different man, equally impressive but all dash and vigor and impulsive power. It was while Lord Prestimion was making the grand processional through the cities of the Mount that he had spied the young Dekkeret in Normork and had chosen him, in his random unpredicta-

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ble way, to join the knights in training in the High Cities. Which seemed an epoch ago, such great changes having occurred in Dekkeret's life since then. At eighteen he had allowed himself fantasies of ascending the Coronal's throne himself one day; but then had come his ill-starred holiday in the mountains of Zimroel, and now, scarcely past twenty, fidgeting in a dusty outer office in this drab city of cheerless Suvrael, he felt he had no future at all, only a barren stretch of meaningless years to use up.

A pudgy sour-faced Hjort appeared and announced, "The Archiregimand Golator Lasgia will see you now."

That was a resonant title; but its owner proved to be a slender dark-skinned woman not greatly older than Dekkeret, who gave him careful scrutiny out of large glossy solemn eyes. In a perfunctory way she offered him greeting with the hand-symbol of the Pontificate and took the document of his credentials from him. "The Initiate Dekkeret," she murmured. "Mission of inquiry, under commission of the Khyntor provincial superstrate. I don't understand, Initiate Dekkeret. Do you serve the Coronal or the Pontifex?"

Uncomfortably Dekkeret said, "I am of Lord Prestimion's staff, a very low echelon. But while I was in Khyntor Province a need arose at the office of the pontificate for an investigation of certain things in Suvrael, and when the local officials discovered that I was bound for Suvrael anyway, they asked me in the interests of economy to take on the job even though I was not in the employ of the Pontifex. and—"

Tapping Dekkeret's papers thoughtfully against her desktop, Golator Lasgia said, "You were bound for Suvrael anyway? May I ask why?"

Dekkeret flushed. "A personal matter, if you please."

She let it pass. "And what affairs of Suvrael can be of such compelling interest to my pontifical brothers of Khyntor, or is my curiosity on that subject also misplaced?"

Dekkeret's discomfort grew. "It has to do with an imbalance of trade," he answered, barely able to meet her cool penetrating gaze. "Khyntor is a manufacturing center; it exchanges goods for the livestock of Suvrael; for the past two years the export of blaves and mounts out of Suvrael has declined steadily, and now strains are developing in the Khyntor economy. The manufacturers are encountering difficulty in carrying so much Suvraelu credit."

"None of this is news to me."

"I've been asked to inspect the rangelands here," said Dekkeret, "in order to determine whether an upturn in livestock production can soon be expected."

"Will you have some wine?" Golator Lasgia asked unexceptedly.

Dekkeret, adrift, considered the proprieties. While he faltered she produced two flasks of golden, deftly snapped their seals, and passed one to him. He took it with a grateful smile.

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"Wine of Khyntor," she said. "Thus we contribute to the Suvraelu trade deficit. The answer, Initiate Dekkeret, is that in the final year of the Pontifex Prankipin a terrible drought struck Suvrael — you may ask, Initiate, how we can tell the difference here between a year of drought and a year of normal rainfall, but there is a difference, Initiate, there is a significant difference — and the grazing districts suffered. There was no way of feeding our cattle, so we butchered as many as the market could hold, and sold much of the remaining stock to ranchers in western Zimroel. Not long after Confalume succeeded to the Labyrinth, the rains returned and the grass began to grow in our savannas. But it takes several years to rebuild the herds. Therefore the trade imbalance will continue a time longer, and then will be cured." She smiled without warmth. "There. I have spared you the inconvenience of an uninteresting journey to the interior."

Dekkeret found himself perspiring heavily. "Nevertheless I must make it, Archiregimand Golator Lasgia."

"You'll learn nothing more than I've just told you."

"I mean no disrespect. But my commission specifically requires me to see with my own eyes—"

She closed hers a moment. "To reach the rangelands just now will involve you in great difficulties, extreme physical discomfort, perhaps considerable personal danger. If I were you, I'd remain in Tolaghai, sampling such pleasures as are available here, and dealing with whatever personal business brought you to Suvrael; and after a proper interval, write your report in consultation with my office and take yourself back to Khyntor."

Immediate suspicions blossomed in Dekkeret. The branch of the government she served was not always cooperative with the Coronal's people; she seemed quite transparently trying to conceal something that was going on in Suvrael; and, although his mission of inquiry was only the pretext for his voyage to this place and not his central task, all the same he had his career to consider, and if he allowed a Pontifical Archiregimand to bamboozle him too easily here it would go badly for him later. He wished he had not accepted the wine from her. But to cover his confusion he allowed himself a series of suave sips, and at length said, "My sense of honor would not permit me to follow such an easy course."

"How old are you, Initiate Dekkeret?"

"I was born in the twelfth year of Lord Confalume."

"Yes, your sense of honor would still prick you, then. Come, look at this map with me." She rose briskly. She was taller than he expected, nearly his own height, which gave her a fragile appearance. Her dark, tightly coiled hair emitted a surprising fragrance, even over the aroma of the strong wine. Golator Lasgia touched the wall and a map of Suvrael in brilliant ochre

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and auburn hues sprang into view. "This is Tolaghai," she said, tapping the northwest corner of the continent. "The grazing lands are here." She indicated a band that began six or seven hundred miles inland and ran in a rough circle surrounding the desert at the heart of Suvrael. "From Tolaghai," she went on, "there are three main routes to the cattle country. This is one. At present it is ravaged by sandstorms and no traffic can safely use it. This is the second route: we are experiencing certain difficulties with Shapeshifter bandits there, and it is also closed to travelers. The third way lies here, by Khulag Pass, but that road has fallen into disuse of late, and an arm of the great desert has begun to encroach on it. Do you see the problems?"

As gently as he could, Dekkeret said, "But if it is the business of Suvrael to raise cattle for export, and all the routes between the grazing lands and the chief port are blocked, is it correct to say that a lack of pasture is the true cause of the recent export shortfalls?"

She smiled. "There are other ports from which we ship our produce in this current situation."

"Well, then, if I go to one of those, I should find an open highway to the cattle country."

Again she tapped the map. "Since last winter the port of Natu Gorvinu has been the center of the cattle trade. This is it, in the east, under the coast of Alhanroel, about six thousand miles from here."

"Six thousand—"

"There is little reason for commerce between Tolaghai and Natu Gorvinu. Perhaps once a year a ship goes from one to the other. Overland the situation is worse, for the roads out of Tolaghai are not maintained east of Kangheez—" she indicated a city perhaps a thousand miles away— "and beyond that, who knows? This is not a heavily settled continent."

"Then there's no way to reach Natu Gorvinu?" Dekkeret said, stunned.

"One. By ship from Tolaghai to Stoien on Alhanroel, and from Stoien to Natu Gorvinu. It should take you only a little over a year. By the time you reach Suvrael again and penetrate the interior, of course, the crisis that you've come to investigate will probably be over. Another flask of the golden, Initiate Dekkeret?"

Numbly he accepted the wine. The distances stupefied him. Another horrendous voyage across the Inner Sea, all the way back to his native continent of Alhanroel, only to turn around and cross the water a third time, sailing now to the far side of Suvrael, and then to find, probably, that the ways to the interior had meanwhile been closed out there, and — no. No. There was such a thing as carrying a penance too far. Better to abandon the mission altogether than subject himself to such absurdities.

While he hesitated Golator Lasgia said, "The hour is late and your problems need longer consideration. Have

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you plans for dinner, Initiate Dekkeret?"

Suddenly, astoundingly, her somber eyes gleamed with mischief of a familiar kind.

3.

In the company of the Archiregimand Golator Lasgia, Dekkeret discovered that life in Tolaghai was not necessarily as bleak as first superficial inspection had indicated. By floater she returned him to his hotel — he could see her distaste at the look of the place — and instructed him to rest and cleanse himself and be ready in an hour. A coppery twilight had descended, and by the time the hour had elapsed the sky was utterly black, with only a few alien constellations cutting jagged tracks across it, and the crescent hint of one or two moons down near the horizon. She called for him punctually. In place of her stark official tunic she wore now something of clinging mesh, almost absurdly seductive. Dekkeret was puzzled by all this. He had had his share of success with women, yes, but so far as he knew he had given her no sign of interest, nothing but the most formal of respect; and yet she clearly was assuming a night of intimacy. Why? Certainly not his irresistible sophistication and physical appeal, nor any political advantage he could confer on her, nor any other rational motive. Except one, that this was a foul backwater outpost where life was stale and uncomfortable, and he was a youthful stranger who might provide a woman herself still young with a night's amusement. He felt used by that, but otherwise he could see no great harm in it. And after months at sea he was willing to run a little risk in the name of pleasure.

They dined at a private club on the outskirts of town, in a garden elegantly decorated with the famous creature-plants of Stoienzar and other flowering wonders that had Dekkeret calculating how much of Tolaghai's modest water supply was diverted toward keeping this one spot flourishing. At other tables, widely separated, were Suvrael-inu in handsome costume, and Golator Lasgia nodded to this one and that, but no one approached her, nor did they stare unduly at Dekkeret. From within the building blew a cool refreshing breeze, the first he had felt in weeks as though some miraculous machine of the ancients, some cousin to the ones that generated the delicious atmosphere of Castle Mount, were at work in there. Dinner was a magnificent affair of lightly fermented fruits and tender juicy slabs of a pale green-fleshed fish, accompanied by a fine dry wine of Amblemorn, no less, the very fringes of Castle Mount. She drank freely, as did he; they grew bright-eyed and animated; the chilly formality of the interview in her office dropped away. He learned that she was nine years his senior, that she was a native of moist lush Narabal on the western continent, that she had entered the service of the

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Pontifex when still a girl, and had been stationed in Suvrael for the past ten years, rising upon Confalume's accession to the Pontificate to her present high administrative post in Tolaghai.

"Do you *like* it here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "One gets accustomed to it."

"I doubt that I would. To me Suvrael is kind of purgatory."

Golator Lasgia nodded. "Exactly."

There was a flash from her eyes to his. He did not dare ask for amplification; but something told him that they had much in common, that she had not been assigned to this wretched place but had requested service here for some dark secret reason of atonement.

He filled their glasses once again and permitted himself the perils of a calm, knowing smile.

She said, "Is it purgatory you seek here?"

"Yes."

She indicated the lavish gardens, the empty wine-flasks, the costly dishes, the half-eaten delicacies. "You have made a poor start, then."

"Milady, dinner with you was no part of my plan."

"Nor mine. But the Divine provides, and we accept. Yes? Yes?" She leaned close. "What will you do now? The voyage to Natu Gorvinu?"

"It seems too heavy an enterprise."

"Then do as I say. Stay in Tolaghai until you grow weary of it; then return and file your report. No one will be the wiser in Khyntor."

"No. I must go inland."

Her expression grew mocking. "Such dedication! But how will you do it? The roads from here are closed."

"You mentioned the one by Khulag Pass, that had fallen into disuse. Mere disuse doesn't seem as serious as deadly sandstorms, or Shapeshifter bandits. Perhaps I can hire a caravan leader to take me that way."

"Into the desert?"

"If needs be."

"The desert is haunted," said Golator Lasgia casually. "You should forget that idea. Call the waiter over: we need more wine."

"I think I've had enough, milady."

"Come, then. We'll go elsewhere."

Stepping from the breeze-cooled garden to the dry hot night air of the street was a shock; but quickly they were in her floater, and not long after they were in a second garden, this one in the courtyard of her official residence, surrounding a pool. There were no weather-machines here to ease the heat, but the Archiregimand had another way, dropping her gown and going to the pool. Her lean, supple body gleamed a moment in the starlight; then she dived, sliding nearly without a splash beneath the surface. She beckoned to him and quickly he joined her.

Afterward they embraced on a bed of close-cropped thick-bladed grass. It was almost as much like wrestling as lovemaking, for she clasped him with her long muscular legs, tried to pinion

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his arms, rolled over and over with him, laughing, and he was amazed at the strength of her, the playful ferocity of her movements. But when they were through testing one another they moved with more harmony, and it was a night of little sleep and much exertion.

Dawn was an amazement: without warning, the sun was in the sky like a trumpet-blast, roasting the surrounding hills with shafts of hot light.

They lay limp, exhausted. Dekkeret turned to her — by cruel morning light she looked less girlish than she had under the stars — and said abruptly, "Tell me about this haunted desert. What spirits will I meet there?"

"How persistent you are!"

"Tell me."

"There are ghosts there that can enter your dreams and steal them. They rob your soul of joy and leave fears in its place. By day they sing in the distance, confusing you, leading you from the path with their clatter and their music."

"Am I supposed to believe this?"

"In recent years many who have entered that desert have perished there."

"Of dream-stealing ghosts."

"So it is said."

"It will make a good tale to tell when I return to Castle Mount, then."

"*If* you return," she said.

"You say that not everyone who has gone into that desert has died of it. Obviously not, for someone has come out to tell the tale. Then I will hire a guide, and take my chances among the ghosts."

"No one will accompany you."

"Then I'll go alone."

"And certainly die." She stroked his powerful arms and made a little purring sound. "Are you so interested in dying, so soon? Dying has no value. It confers no beneifts. Whatever peace you seek, the peace of the grave is not it. Forget the desert journey. Stay here with me."

"We'll go together."

She laughed. "I think not."

It was, Dekkeret realized, madness. He had doubts of her tales of ghosts and dream-stealers, unless what went on in that desert was some trickery of the rebellious aborigines of the planet, the Shapeshifters or Metamorphs, and even then he doubted it. Perhaps all her tales of danger were only ruses to keep him longer in Tolaghai. Flattering if true, but of no help in his quest. And she was right about death being a useless form of purgation. If his adventures in Suvrael were to have meaning, he must succeed in surviving them.

Golator Lasgia drew him to his feet. They bathed briefly in the pool; then she led him within, to the most handsomely appointed dwelling he had seen this side of Castle Mount, and gave him a meal of fruits and dried fish.

Suddenly in mid-morning she said, "*Must* you go into the interior?"

"An inner need drives me in that direction."

"Very well, we have in Tolaghai a

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certain scoundrel who often ventures inland by way of Khulag Pass, or so he claims, and seems to survive it. For a purse full of royals he'll no doubt guide you there. His name is Barjazid; and if you insist, I'll summon him and ask him to assist you."

4.

Scoundrel seemed the proper word for Barjazid. He was a lean and disreputable-looking little man, shabbily dressed in an old brown robe and worn leather sandals, with an ancient necklace of mismatched sea-dragon bones at his throat. His lips were thin, his eyes had a feverish glaze, his skin was burned almost black by the desert sun. He stared at Dekkeret as though weighing the contents of his purse.

"If I take you," said Barjazid in a voice altogether lacking in resonance but yet not weak, "you will first sign a quitclaim absolving me of any responsibility to your heirs, in the event of your death."

"I have no heirs," Dekkeret replied.

"Kinfolks, then. I won't be hauled into the Pontifical courts by your father or your elder sister because you've perished in the desert."

"Have you perished in the desert yet?"

Barjazid looked baffled. "An absurd question."

"You go into that desert," Dekkeret persisted, "and you return alive. Yes? Well then, if you know your trade, you'll come out alive again this time, and so will I. I'll do what you do and go where you go. If you live, I live. If I perish, you'll have perished too, and my family will have no lien."

"I can withstand the power of the stealers of dreams," said Barjazid. "This I know from ample tests. How do you know you'll prevail over them as readily?"

Dekkeret helped himself to a new serving of Barjazid's tea, a rich infusion brewed from some potent shrub of the sandhills. The two men squatted on mounds of haigus-hide blankets in the musty back room of a shop belonging to Barjazid's brother's son: it was evidently a large clan. Dekkeret sipped the sharp, bitter tea reflectively and said, after a moment, "Who are these dream-stealers?"

"I cannot say."

"Shapeshifters, perhaps?"

Barjazid shrugged. "They have not bothered to tell me their pedigree. Shapeshifters, Ghayrogs, Vroons, ordinary humans — how would I know? In dreams all voices are alike. Certainly there are tribes of Shapeshifters loose in the desert, and some of them are angry folk given to mischief, and perhaps they have the skill of touching minds along with the skill of altering their bodies. Or perhaps not."

"If the Shapeshifters have closed two of the three routes out of Tolaghai, the Coronal's forces have work to do here."

"This is no affair of mine."

"The Shapeshifters are a subjugated

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race. They must not be allowed to disrupt the daily flow of life on Majipoor."

"It was you who suggested that the dream-stealers were Shapeshifters," Barjazid pointed out acidly. "I myself have no such theory. And who the dream-stealers are is not important. What is important is that they make the lands beyond Khulag Pass dangerous for travelers."

"Why do you go there, then?"

"I am not likely ever to answer a question that begins with *why*," said Barjazid. "I go there because I have reason to go there. Unlike others, I seem to return alive."

"Does everyone else who crosses the pass die?"

"I doubt it. I have no idea. Beyond question many have perished since the dream-stealers first were heard from. At the best of times that desert has been perilous." Barjazid stirred his tea. He began to appear restless. "If you accompany me, I'll protect you as best I can. But I make no guarantees for your safety. Which is why I demand that you give me legal absolution from responsibility."

Dekkeret said, "If I sign such a paper it would be signing a death warrant. What would keep you from murdering me ten miles beyond the pass, robbing my corpse, and blaming it all on the dream-stealers?"

"By the Lady, I am no murderer! I am not even a thief."

"But to give you a paper saying that if I die on the journey you are not to be blamed — might that not tempt even an honest man beyond all limits?"

Barjazid's eyes blazed with fury. He gestured as though to bring the interview to an end. "What goes beyond limits is your audacity," he said, rising and tossing his cup aside. "Find another guide, if you fear me so much."

Dekkeret, remaining seated, said quietly, "I regret the suggestion. I ask you only to see my position: a stranger and a young man in a remote and difficult land, forced to seek the aid of those he does not know to take him into places where improbable things happen. I must be cautious."

"Be even more cautious, then. Take the next ship for Stoien and return to the easy life of Castle Mount."

"I ask you again to guide me. For a good price, and nothing more about signing a quitclaim to my life. How much is your fee?"

"Thirty royals," Barjazid said.

Dekkeret grunted as though he had been struck below the ribs. It had cost him less than that to sail from Piliplok to Tolaghai. Thirty royals was a year's wage for someone like Barjazid; to pay it would require Dekkeret to draw on an expensive letter of credit. His impulse was to respond with knightly scorn, and offer ten; but he realized that he had forfeited his bargaining strength by objecting to the quitclaim. If he haggled now over the price as well, Barjazid would simply terminate the negotiations.

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He said at length, "So be it. But no quitclaim."

Barjazid gave him a sour look. "Very well. No quitclaim, as you insist."

"How is the money to be paid?"

"Half now, half on the morning of departure."

"Ten now," said Dekkeret, "and ten on the morning of departure, and ten on the day of my return to Tolaghai."

"That makes a third of my fee conditional on your surviving the trip. Remember that I make no guarantee of that."

"Perhaps my survival becomes more likely if I hold back a third of the fee until the end."

"One expects a certain haughtiness from one of the Coronal's knights, and one learns to ignore it as a mere mannerism, up to point. But I think you have passed the point." Once again Barjazid made a gesture of dismissal. "There is too little trust between us. It would be a poor idea for us to travel together."

"I meant no disrespect," said Dekkeret.

"But you ask me to leave myself to the mercies of your kinfolk if you perish, and you seem to regard me as an ordinary cutthroat or at best a brigand, and you feel it necessary to arrange my fee so that I will have less motivation to murder you." Barjazid spat. "The other face of haughtiness is courtesy, young knight. A Skandar dragon-hunter would have shown me more courtesy. I did not seek your employ, bear in mind. I will not humiliate myself to aid you. If you please—"

"Wait."

"I have other business this morning."

"Fifteen royals now," said Dekkeret, "and fifteen when we set forth, as you say. Yes?"

"Even though you think I'll murder you in the desert?"

"I became too suspicious because I didn't want to appear too innocent," said Dekkeret. "It was tactless for me to have said the things I said. I ask you to hire yourself to me on the terms agreed."

Barjazid was silent.

From his purse Dekkeret drew three five-royal coins. Two were pieces of the old coinage, showing the Pontifex Prankipin with Lord Confalume. The third was a brilliant newly-minted one, bearing Confalume as Pontifex and the image of Lord Prestimion on the reverse. He extended them toward Barjazid, who selected the new coin and examined it with great curiosity.

"I have not seen one of these before," he said. "Shall we call in my brother's son for an opinion of its authenticity?"

It was too much. "Do you take me for a passer of false money?" Dekkeret roared, leaping to his feet and looming ferociously over the small man. Rage throbbed in him; he came close to striking Barjazid.

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But he perceived that the other was altogether fearless and unmoving in the face of his wrath. Barjazid actually smiled, and took the other two coins from Dekkeret's trembling hand.

"So you too have little liking for groundless accusations, eh, young knight?" Barjazid laughed. "Let us have a treaty, then. You'll not expect me to assassinate you beyond Khulag Pass, and I'll not send your coins out to the money-changer's for an appraisal, eh? Well? Is it agreed?"

Dekkeret nodded wearily.

"Nevertheless this is a risky journey," said Barjazid, "and I would not have you too confident of a safe return. Much depends on your own strength when the time of testing comes."

"So be it. When do we leave?"

"Fiveday, at the sunset hour. We depart the city from Pinitor Gate. Is that place known to you?"

"I'll find it," Dekkeret said. "Till Fiveday, at sunset."

He offered the little man his hand.

4.

Fiveday was three days hence. Dekkeret did not regret the delay, for that gave him three more nights with the Archiregimand Golator Lasgia; or so he thought, but in fact it happened otherwise. She was not at her office by the waterfront on the evening of Dekkeret's meeting with Barjazid, nor would her aides transmit a message to her. He wandered the torrid city disconsolately until long after dark, finding no companionship at all, and ultimately ate a drab and gritty meal at his hotel, still hoping that Golator Lasgia would miraculously appear and whisk him away. She did not, and he slept fitfully and uneasily, his mind obsessed by the memories of her smooth flanks, her small firm breasts, her hungry, aggressive mouth. Toward dawn came a dream, vague and unreadable, in which she and Barjazid and some Hjorts and Vroons performed a complex dance in a roofless sand-swept stone ruin, and afterward he fell into a sound sleep, not awakening until midday on Seaday. The entire city appeared to be in hiding then, but when the cooler hours came he went round to the Archiregimand's office once again, once again not seeing her, and then spent the evening in the same purposeless fashion as the night before. As he gave himself up to sleep he prayed fervently to the Lady of the Isle to send Golator Lasgia to him. But it was not the function of the Lady to do such things, and all that did reach him in the night was a bland and cheering dream, perhaps a gift of the blessed Lady but probably not, in which he dwelled in a thatched hut on the shores of the Great Sea by Til-omon and nibbled on sweet purplish fruits that squirted juice to stain his cheeks. When he awakened he found a Hjort of the Archiregimand's staff waiting outside his room, to summon him to the presence of Golator Lasgia.

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That evening they dined together late, and went to her villa again, for a night of lovemaking that made their other one seem like a month of chastity. Dekkeret did not ask her at any time why she had refused him these two nights past, but as they breakfasted on spiced gihorna-skin and golden wine, both he and she vigorous and fresh after having had no sleep whatever, she said, "I wish I had had more time with you this week, but at least we were able to share your final night. Now you'll go to the Desert of Stolen Dreams with my taste on your lips. Have I made you forget all other women?"

"You know the answer."

"Good. Good. You may never embrace a woman again; but the last was the best, and few are so lucky as that."

"Were you so certain I'll die in the desert, then?"

"Few travelers return," she said. "The chances of my seeing you again are slight."

Dekkeret shivered faintly — not out of fear, but in recognition of Golator Lasgia's inner motive. Some morbidity in her evidently had led her to snub him those two nights, so that the third would be all the more intense, for she must believe that he would be a dead man shortly after and she wanted the special pleasure of being his last woman. That chilled him. If he were going to die before long, Dekkeret would just as soon have had the other two nights with her as well; but apparently the subtleties of her mind went beyond such crass notions. He bade her a courtly farewell, not knowing if they would meet again or even if he wished it, for all her beauty and voluptuary skills. Too much that was mysterious and dangerously capricious lay coiled within her.

Not long before sunset he presented himself at Pinitor Gate on the city's southeastern flank. It would not have surprised him if Barjazid had reneged on their agreement, but no, a floater was waiting just outside the pitted sandstone arch of the old gate, and the little man stood leaning against the vehicle's side. With him were three companions: a Vroon, a Skandar, and a slender, hard-eyed young man who was obviously Barjazid's son.

At a nod from Barjazid the giant four-armed Skandar took hold of Dekkeret's two sturdy bags and stowed them with a casual flip in the floater's keep. "Her name," said Barjazid, "is Khaymak Gran. She is unable to speak, but far from stupid. She has served me many years, since I found her tongueless and more than half dead in the desert. The Vroon is Serifain Reinaulion, who often speaks too much, but knows the desert tracks better than anyone of this city." Dekkeret exchanged brusque salutes with the small tentacular being. "And my son, Dinitak, will also accompany us," Barjazid said. "Are you well rested, Initiate?"

"Well enough," Dekkeret answer-

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ed. He had slept most of the day, after his unsleeping night.

"We travel mainly by darkness, and camp in heat of day. My understanding is that I am to take you through Khulag Pass, across the wasteland known as the Desert of Stolen Dreams, and to the edge of the grazing lands around Ghyzyn Kor, where you have certain inquiries to make among the herdsmen. And then back to Tolaghai. Is this so?"

"Exactly," Dekkeret said.

Barjazid made no move to enter the floater. Dekkeret frowned; and then he understood. From his purse he produced three more five-royal pieces, two of them old ones of the Prankipin coinage, the third a shining coin of Lord Prestimion. These he handed to Barjazid, who plucked forth the Prestimion coin and tossed it to his son. The boy eyed the bright coin suspiciously. "The new Coronal," said Barjazid. "Make yourself familiar with his face. We'll be seeing it often."

"He will have a glorious reign," said Dekkeret. "He will surpass even Lord Confalume in grandeur. Already a wave of new prosperity sweeps the northern continents, and they were prosperous enough before. Lord Prestimion's plans are ambitious."

Barjazid said, with a shrug, "Events on the northern continents carry very little weight here, and somehow prosperity on Alhanroel or Zimroel has a way of mattering hardly at all to Suvrael. But we rejoice that the Divine has blessed us with another splendid Coronal. May he remember, occasionally, that there is a southern land also, and citizens of his realm dwelling in it. Come, now: time to be traveling."

6.

The Pinitor Gate marked an absolute boundary between city and desert. To one side there was a district of low sprawling villas, walled and faceless; to the other was only barren waste beyond the city's perimeter. Nothing broke the emptiness of the desert but the highway, a broad cobbled track that wound slowly upward toward the crest of the ridge that encircled Tolaghai.

The heat was intolerable. By night the desert was perceptibly cooler than by day, but scorching all the same. Though the great blazing eye of the sun was gone, the orange sands, radiating the stored heat of the day toward the sky, shimmered and sizzled with the intensity of a banked furnace. A strong wind was blowing — with the coming of the darkness, Dekkeret had noticed, the flow of the wind reversed, blowing now from the heart of the continent toward the sea — but it made no difference: shore-wind or sea-wind, both were oppressive streams of dry baking air that offered no mercies.

In the clear arid atmosphere the light of the stars and moons was unusually bright, and there was an earthly glow as well, a strange ghostly greenish radiance that rose in irregular patches from the slopes flanking the

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highway. Dekkeret asked about it. "From certain plants," said the Vroon. "They shine with an inner light in the darkness. To touch such a plant is always painful and often fatal."

"How am I to know them by daylight?"

"They look like pieces of old string, weathered and worn, sprouting in bunches from clefts in the rock. Not all the plants of such a form are dangerous, but you would do well to avoid any of them."

"And any other," Barjazid put in. "In this desert the plants are well defended, sometimes in surprising ways. Each year our garden teaches us some ugly new secret."

Dekkeret nodded. He did not plan to stroll about out there, but if he did, he would make it his rule to touch nothing.

The floater was old and slow, the grade of the highway steep. Through the broiling night the car labored unhurriedly onward. There was little conversation within. The Skandar drove, with the Vroon beside her, and occasionally Serifain Reinaulion made some comment on the condition of the road; in the rear compartment the two Barjazids sat silently, leaving Dekkeret alone to stare with growing dismay at the infernal landscape. Under the merciless hammers of the sun the ground had a beaten, broken look. Such moisture as winter had brought this land had long ago been sucked forth, leaving gaunt, angular fissures. The surface of the ground was pockmarked where the unceasing winds had strafed it with sand particles, and the plants, low and sparsely-growing things, were of many varieties but all appeared twisted, tortured, gnarled, and knobby. To the heat Dekkeret gradually found himself growing accustomed: it was simply there, like one's skin, and after a time one came to accept it. But the deathly bleakness of everything, numbed his soul. A landscape that was hateful was a new concept to him, almost an inconceivable one. Wherever he had gone on Majipoor he had known only beauty. He thought of his home city of Normork spread along the crags of the Mount, with its winding boulevards and its wondrous stone wall and its gentle midnight rains. He thought of the giant city of Stee higher on the Mount, where once he had walked at dawn in a garden of trees no taller than his ankle, with leaves of a green hue that dazzled his eyes. He thought of High Morpin, that glimmering miracle of a city devoted wholly to pleasure, that lay almost in the shadow of the Coronal's awesome castle atop the Mount. And the rugged forested wilds of Khyntor, and the brilliant white towers of Ni-moya, and the sweet meadows of the Glayge Valley — how beautiful a world this is, Dekkeret thought, and what marvels it holds, and how terrible this place I find myself in now!

He told himself that he must alter his values and strive to discover the

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beauties of this desert, or else it would paralyze his spirit. Let there be beauty in utter dryness, he thought, and beauty in menacing angularity, and beauty in pockmarks, and beauty in ragged plants that shine with a pale green glow by night. Let spiky be beautiful, let bleak be beautiful, let harsh be beautiful. For what is beauty, Dekkeret asked himself, if not a learned response to things beheld? Why is a meadow intrinsically more beautiful than a pebbled desert? Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder; therefore reeducate your eye, Dekkeret, lest the ugliness of this land kill you.

He tried to make himself love the desert. He pulled such words as "bleak" and "dismal" and "repellent" from his mind as though pulling fangs from a wild beast, and instructed himself to see this landscape as tender and comforting. He made himself admire the contorted strata of the exposed rock faces and the great gouges of the dry washes. He found aspects of delight in the bedraggled beaten shrubs. He discovered things to esteem in the small toothy nocturnal creatures that occasionally scuttered across the road. And as the night wore on, the desert did become less hateful to him, and then neutral, and at last he believed he actually could see some beauty in it; and by the hour before dawn he had ceased to think about it at all.

Morning came suddenly: a shaft of orange flame breaking against the mountain wall to the west, a limb of bright red fire rising over the opposite rim of the range, and then the sun, its yellow face tinged more with bronzy-green than in the northern latitudes, bursting into the sky like an untethered balloon. In this moment of apocalyptic sunrise Dekkeret was startled to find himself thinking in sharp pain of the Archiregimand Golator Lasgia, wondering whether she was watching the dawn, and with whom; he savored the pain a little, and then, banishing the thought, said to Barjazid, "It was a night without phantoms, Is this desert not supposed to be haunted?"

"Beyond the pass is where the real trouble begins," the little man replied.

They rode onward through the early hours of the day. Dinitak served a rough breakfast, dry bread and sour wine. Looking back, Dekkeret saw a mighty view, the land sloping off below him like a great tawny apron, all folds and cracks and wrinkles, and the city of Tolaghai barely visible as a huddled clutter at the bottom end, with the vastness of the sea to the north rolling on to the horizon. The sky was without clouds, and the blue of it was so enhanced by the terra-cotta hue of the land that it seemed almost to be a second sea above him. Already the heat was rising. By mid-morning it was all but unendurable, and still the Skandar driver moved impassively up the breast of the mountain. Dekkeret dozed occasionally, but in the cramped vehicle sleep was impossible. Were they going to drive all night and then

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all day too? He asked no questions. But just as weariness and discomfort were reaching intolerable levels in him, Khaymak Gran abruptly swung the floater to the left, down a short spur of the road, and brought it to a halt.

"Our first day's camp," Barjazid announced.

Where the spur ended, a high flange of rock reared out of the desert floor, forming an overarching shelter. In front of it, protected by shadows at this time of day, was a wide sandy area that had obviously been used many times as a campsite. At the base of the rock formation Dekkeret saw a dark spot where water mysteriously seeped from the ground, not exactly a gushing spring but useful and welcome enough to parched travelers in this terrible desert. The place was ideal. And plainly the entire first day's journey had been timed to bring them here before the worst of the heat descended.

The Skandar and young Barjazid pulled straw mats from some compartment of the floater and scattered them on the sand; the midday meal was offered, chunks of dried meat, a bit of tart fruit, and warm Skandar mead; then, without a word, the two Barjazids and the Vroon and the Skandar sprawled out on their mats and dropped instantly into sleep. Dekkeret stood alone, probing between his teeth for a bit of meat caught there. Now that he could sleep, he was not at all sleepy. He wandered the edge of the campsite, staring into the sun-blasted wastes just outside the area in shadow. Not a creature could be seen, and even the plants, poor shabby things, seemed to be trying to pull themselves into the ground. The mountains rose steeply above him to the south; the pass could not be far off. And then? And then?

He tried to sleep. Unwanted images plagued him. Golator Lasgia hovered above his mat, so close that he felt he could seize her and draw her down to him, but she bobbed away and was lost in the heat-haze. For the thousandth time he saw himself in that forest in the Khyntor Marches, pursuing his prey, aiming, suddenly trembling. He shook that off and found himself scrambling along the great wall at Normork, with cool delectable air in his lungs. But these were not dreams, only idle fantasies and fugitive memories; sleep would not come for a long time, and when it did, it was deep and dreamless and brief.

Strange sounds awakened him: humming, singing, musical instruments in the distance, the faint but distinct noises of a caravan of many travelers. He thought he heard the tinkle of bells, the booming of drums. For a time he lay still, listening, trying to understand. Then he sat up, blinked, looked around. Twilight had come. He had slept away the hottest part of the day, and the shadows now encroached from the other side. His four companions were up and packing the mats. Dekkeret cocked an ear, seeking the source of the sounds. But they seemed

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o come from everywhere, or from nowhere. He remembered Golator Lasgia's tale of the ghosts of the desert that sing by day, confusing travelers, leading them from the true path with their clatter and music.

To Barjazid he said, "What are those sounds?"

"Sounds?"

"You don't hear them? Voices, bells, footfalls, the humming of many travelers?"

Barjazid looked amused. "You mean the desert-songs."

"Ghost-songs?"

"They could be that. Or merely the sounds of wayfarers coming down the mountain, rattling chains, striking gongs. Which is more probable?"

"Neither is probable," said Dekkeret gloomily. "There are no ghosts in the world I inhabit. But there are no wayfarers on this road except ourselves."

"Are you sure, Initiate?"

"That there are no wayfarers, or no ghosts?"

"Either."

Dinitak Barjazid, who had been standing to one side taking in this interchange, approached Dekkeret and said, "Are you frightened?"

"The unknown is always disturbing. But at this point I feel more curiosity than fear."

"I will gratify your curiosity, then. As the heat of the day diminishes, the rocky cliffs and the sands give up their warmth, and in cooling they contract and release sounds. Those are the drums and bells you hear. There are no ghosts in this place," the boy said.

The elder Barjazid made a brusque gesture. Serenely the boy moved away.

"You didn't want him to tell me that, did you?" Dekkeret asked. "You prefer me to think that there are ghosts all about me."

Smiling, Barjazid said, "It makes no difference to me. Believe whichever explanation you find more cheering. You will meet a sufficiency of ghosts, I assure you, on the far side of the pass."

7.

All Starday evening they climbed the winding road up the face of the mountain, and near midnight came to Khulag Pass. Here the air was cooler, for they were thousands of feet above sea level and warring winds brought some relief from the swelter. The pass was a broad notch in the mountain wall, surprisingly deep; it was early Sunday morning before they completed its traversal and began their descent into the greater desert of the interior.

Dekkeret was stunned by what lay before him. By bright moonlight he beheld a scene of unparalleled bleakness, that made the lands on the cityward side of the pass look like gardens. That other desert was a rocky one, but this was sandy, an ocean of dunes broken here and there by open patches of hard pebble-strewn ground. There was scarcely any vegetation, none at all in

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the duned places and the merest of sorry scraggles elsewhere. And the heat! Upward out of the dark bowl ahead there came currents of stupefying hot blasts, air that seemed stripped of all nourishment, air that had been baked to death. It astounded him that somewhere in that furnace there could be grazing lands. He tried to remember the map in the Archiregimand's office: the cattle country was a belt that flanked the continent's inner-most zone of desert, but here below Khulag Pass an arm of the central wastes had somehow encroached — that was it. On the far side of this band of formidable sterility lay a green zone of grass and browsing beasts, or so he prayed.

Through the early morning hours they headed down the inner face of the mountains and onto the great central plateau. By first light Dekkeret noticed an odd feature far downslope, an oval patch of inky darkness sharply outlined against the buff breast of the desert, and as they drew nearer he saw that it was an oasis of sorts, the dark patch resolving itself into a grove of slender long-limbed trees with tiny violet-flushed leaves. This place was the second day's campsite. Tracks in the sand showed where other parties had camped; there was scattered debris under the trees; in a clearing at the heart of the grove were half a dozen crude shelters made of heaped-up rocks topped with old dried boughs. Just beyond, a brackish stream wound between the trees and terminated in a small stagnant pool, green with algae. And a little way beyond that was a second pool, apparently fed by a stream that ran wholly underground, the waters of which were pure. Between the two pools Dekkeret saw a curious construction, seven round-topped stone columns as high as his waist, arranged in a double arc. He inspected them.

"Shapeshifter work," Barjazid told him.

"A Metamorph altar?"

"So we think. We know the Shapeshifters often visit this oasis. We find little Piurivar souvenirs here — prayer sticks, bits of feathers, small clever wickerwork cups."

Dekkeret stared about uneasily at the trees as if he expected them to transform themselves momentarily into a party of savage aborigines. He had had little contact with the native race of Majipoor, those defeated and displaced indigenes of the forests, and what he knew of them was mainly rumor and fantasy, born of fear, ignorance, and guilt. They once had had great cities, that much was certain — Alhanroel was strewn with the ruins of them, and in school Dekkeret had seen views of the most famous of all, vast stone Velalisier not far from the Labyrinth of the Pontifex; but those cities had died thousands of years ago, and with the coming of the human and other races to Majipoor the native Piurivars had been forced back into the darker places of the planet, mainly a great wooded reservation in Zimroel

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somewhere southeast of Khyntor. To his knowledge Dekkeret had seen actual Metamorphs only two or three times, frail greenish folk with strange blank-featured faces, but of course they slid from one form to another in mimicry of a marvelously easy kind and for all he knew this little Vroon here was a secret Shapeshifter, or Barjazid himself.

He said, "How can Shapeshifters or anyone else survive in this desert?"

"They're resourceful people. They adapt."

"Are there many of them here?"

"Who can know? I've encountered a few scattered bands, fifty, seventy-five all told. Probably there are others. Or perhaps I keep meeting the same ones over and over again in different guises, eh?"

"A strange people," Dekkeret said, rubbing his hand idly over the smooth stone dome atop the nearest of the altar-columns. With astonishing speed Barjazid grasped Dekkeret's wrist and pulled it back.

"Don't touch those!"

"Why not?" said Dekkeret, amazed.

"Those stones are holy."

"To you?"

"To those who erected them," said Barjazid dourly. "We respect them. We honor the magic that may be in them. And in this land one never casually invites the vengeance of one's neighbors."

Dekkeret stared in astonishment at the little man, at the columns, at the two pools, the graceful sharp-leaved trees that surrounded them. Even in the heat he shivered. He looked out, beyond the borders of the little oasis, to the swaybacked dunes all around, to the dusty ribbon of road that disappeared southward into the land of mysteries. The sun was climbing quickly now and its warmth was like a terrible flail pounding the sky, the land, the few vulnerable travelers wandering in this awful place. He glanced back, to the mountains he had just passed through, a huge and ominous wall cutting him off from what passed for civilization on this torrid continent. He felt frighteningly alone here, weak, lost.

Dinitak Barjazid appeared, tottering under a great load of flasks that he dropped almost at Dekkeret's feet. Dekkeret helped the boy fill them from the pure pool, a task that took an unexpectedly long while. He sampled the water himself: cool, clear, with a strange metallic taste, not displeasing, that Dinitak said came from dissolved minerals. It took a dozen trips to carry all the flasks to the floater. There would be no more sources of fresh water, Dinitak explained, for several days.

They lunched on the usual rough provisions and afterward, as the heat rose toward its overwhelming midday peak, they settled on the straw mats to sleep. This was the third day that Dekkeret had slept by day and by now his body was growing attuned to the

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change; he closed his eyes, commended his soul to the beloved Lady of the Isle, Lord Prestimion's holy mother, and tumbled almost instantly into heavy slumber.

This time dreams came.

He had not dreamed properly for more days than he cared to remember. To Dekkeret as to all other folk of Majipoor dreams were a central part of existence, nightly providing comfort, reassurance, instruction, clarification, guidance and reprimands, and much else. From childhood one was trained to make one's mind receptive to the messengers of sleep, to observe and record one's dreams, to carry them with one through the night and into the waking hours beyond. And always there was the benevolent omnipresent figure of the Lady of the Isle of Sleep hovering over one, helping one explore the workings of one's spirit and through her sendings offering direct communication to each of the billions of souls that dwelled on vast Majipoor.

Dekkeret now saw himself walking on a mountain ridge that he perceived to be the crest of the range they had lately crossed. He was by himself and the sun was impossibly great, filling half the sky; yet the heat was not troublesome. So steep was the slope that he could look straight down over the edge, down and down and down for what seemed hundreds of miles, and he beheld a roaring smoking cauldron beneath him, a surging volcanic crater in which red magma bubbled and churned. That immense vortex of subterranean power did not frighten him; indeed it exerted a strange pull, a blatant appeal, so that he yearned to plunge himself into it, to dive to its depths and swim in its molten heart. He began to descend, running and skipping, often leaving the ground and floating, drifting, flying down the immense hillside, and as he drew nearer he thought he saw faces in the throbbing lava, Lord Prestimion, and the Pontifex, and Barjazid's face, and Golator Lasgia's — and were those Metamorphs, those strange sly half-visible images near the periphery? The core of the volcano was a stew of potent figures. Dekkeret ran toward them in love, thinking, Take me into you, here I am, here I come; and when he perceived, behind all the others, a great white disk that he understood to be the loving countenance of the Lady of the Isle, a deep and powerful bliss invaded his soul, for he knew this now to be a sending, and it was many months since last the kind Lady had touched his sleeping mind.

Sleeping but aware, watching the Dekkeret within the dream, he awaited the consummation, the joining of dream-Dekkeret to dream-Lady, the immolation in the volcano that would bring some revelation of truth, some instant of knowledge leading to joy. But then a strangeness crossed the dream like some spreading veil. The colors faded; the faces dimmed; he continued to run down the side of the mountain wall, but now he stumbled

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often, he tripped and sprawled, he abraded his hands and knees against hot desert rocks, and he was losing the path entirely, moving sideways instead of downward, unable to progress. He had been on the verge of a moment of delight, and somehow it was out of reach now and he felt only distress, uneasiness, shock. The ecstasy that seemed to be the promise of the dream was draining from it. The brilliant colors yielded to an all-encompassing gray, and all motion ceased: he stood frozen on the mountain face, staring rigidly down at a dead crater, and the sight of it made him tremble and pull his knees to his chest, and he lay there sobbing until he woke.

He blinked and sat up. His head pounded and his eyes felt raw, and there was a dismal tension in his chest and shoulders. This was not what dreams, even the most terrifying of dreams, were supposed to provide: such a gritty residue of malaise, confusion, fear. It was early afternoon and the blinding sun hung high above the treetops. Nearby him lay Khaymak Gran and the Vroon, Serifain Reinaulion; a bit farther away was Dinitak Barjazid. They seemed sound asleep. The elder Barjazid was nowhere in view. Dekkeret rolled over and pressed his cheeks into the warm sand beside his mat and attempted to let the tension ease from him. Something had gone wrong in his sleep, he knew; some dark force had meddled in his dream, had stolen the virtue from it and given him pain in exchange. So this was what they meant by the haunting of the desert? This was dream-stealing? He drew himself together in a knotted ball. He felt soiled, used, invaded. He wondered if it would be like this every sleep-period now, as they penetrated deeper into this awful desert; he wondered whether it might get even worse.

After a time Dekkeret returned to sleep. More dreams came, stray blurred scraps without rhythm or design. He ignored them. When he woke, the day was ending and the desert-sounds, the ghost-sounds, were nibbling at his ears, tinklings and murmurings and far-off laughter. He felt more weary than if he had not slept at all.

8.

The others showed no sign of having been disturbed as they slept. They greeted Dekkeret upon rising in their usual manners — the huge taciturn Skandar woman not at all, the little Vroon with amiable buzzing chirps and much coiling and interlacing of tentacles, the two Barjazids with curt nods — and if they were aware that one member of their party had been visited with torments in his dreams, they said nothing of it. After breakfast the elder Barjazid held a brief conference with Serifain Reinaulion concerning the roads they were to travel that night, and then they were off into the moonlit darkness once again.

I will pretend that nothing out of

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the ordinary happened, Dekkeret resolved. I will not let them know that I am vulnerable to these phantoms.

But it was a short-lived resolution. As the floater was passing through a region of dry lakebeds out of which odd gray-green stony humps projected by the thousands, Barjazid turned to him suddenly and said, breaking a long silence, "Did you dream well?"

Dekkeret knew he could not conceal his fatigue. "I have had better rest," he muttered.

Barjazid's glossy eyes were fixed inexorably on his. "My son says you moaned in your sleep, that you rolled over many times and clutched your knees. Did you feel the touch of the dream-stealers, Initiate?"

"I felt the presence of a troubling power in my dreams. Whether this was the touch of the dream-stealers I have no way of knowing."

"Will you describe the sensations?"

"Are you a dream-speaker then, Barjazid?" Dekkeret snapped in sudden anger. "Why should I let you probe and poke in my mind? My dreams are my own!"

"Peace, peace, good knight. I meant no intrusion."

"Let me be, then."

"Your safety is my responsibility. If the demons of this wasteland have begun to reach your spirit, it is in your own interest to inform me."

"Demons, are they?"

"Demons, ghosts, phantoms, disaffected Shapeshifters, whatever they are," Barjazid said impatiently. "The beings that prey on sleeping travelers. Did they come to you or did they not?"

"My dreams were not pleasing."

"I ask you to tell me in what way."

Dekkeret let his breath out slowly. "I felt I was having a sending from the Lady, a dream of peace and joy. And gradually it changed its nature. It darkened and became chaotic, and all the joy was taken from it, and I ended the dream worse than when I entered it."

Nodding earnestly, Barjazid said, "Yes, yes, those are the symptoms. A touch on the mind, an invasion of the dream, a disturbing overlay, a taking of energy."

"A kind of vampirism?" Dekkeret suggested. "Creatures that lie in wait in this wasteland and tap the life-force from unwary travelers?"

Barjazid smiled. "You insist on speculations. I make no hypothesis of any kind, Initiate."

"Have you felt their touch in your own sleep?"

The small man stared at Dekkeret strangely. "No. No, never."

"Never? Are you immune?"

"Seemingly so."

"And your boy?"

"It has befallen him several times. It happens to him only rarely out here, one time out of fifty, perhaps. But the immunity is not hereditary, it appears."

"And the Skandar? And the Vroon?"

"They too have been touched,"

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said Barjazid. "On infrequent occasions. They find it bothersome but not intolerable."

"Yet others have died from the dream-stealers' touch."

"More hypothesis," said Barjazid. "Most travelers passing this way in recent years have reported experiencing strange dreams. Some of them have lost their way and have failed to return. How can we know whether there is a connection between the disturbing dreams and the losing of the way?"

"You are a very cautious man," Dekkeret said. "You leap to no conclusions."

"And I have survived to a fair old age, while many who were more rash have returned to the Source."

"Is mere survival the highest achievement you think one can attain?"

Barjazid laughed. "Spoken like a true knight of the Castle! No, Initiate, I think there's more to living than mere avoidance of death. But survival helps, eh, Initiate? Survival's a good basic requirement for those who go on to do high deeds. The dead don't achieve a thing."

Dekkeret did not care to pursue that theme. The code of values of a knight-initiate and of such a one as Barjazid were hardly comparable; and, besides, there was something wily and mercurial about Barjazid's style of argument that made Dekkeret feel slow and stolid and hulking, and he disliked exposing himself to that feeling. He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Do the dreams get worse as one gets deeper into the desert?"

"So I am given to understand," said Barjazid.

Yet as the night waned and the time for making camp arrived, Dekkeret found himself ready and even eager to contend once more with the phantoms of sleep. They had camped this day far out on the bowl of the desert, in a low-lying area where much of the sand had been swept aside by scouring winds, and the underlying rock shield showed through. The dry air had a weird crackle to it, a kind of wind-borne buzz, as if the force of the sun were stripping the particles of matter bare in this place. It was only an hour before midday by the time they were ready for sleep. Dekkeret settled calmly on his mat of straw and, without fear, offered his soul on the verge of slumber to whatever might come. In his order of knighthood he had been trained in the customary notions of courage, naturally, and was expected to meet challenges without fear, but he had been little tested thus far. On placid Majipoor one must work hard to find such challenges, going into the untamed parts of the world, for in the settled regions life is orderly and courteous; therefore Dekkeret had gone abroad, but he had not done well by his first major trial, in the forests of the Khyntor Marches. Here he had another chance. These foul dreams held forth to him, in a way, the promise of redemption.

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He gave himself to sleep.

And quickly dreamed. He was back in Tolaghai, but a Tolaghai curiously transformed, a city of smooth-faced alabaster villas and dense green gardens, though the heat was still of tropical intensity. He wandered up one boulevard and down the next, admiring the elegance of the architecture and the splendor of the shrubbery. His clothing was the traditional green-and-gold of the Coronal's entourage, and as he encountered the citizens of Tolaghai making their twilight promenades he bowed gracefully to them, and exchanged with them the starburst finger-symbol that acknowledged the Coronal's authority. To him now came the slender figure of the lovely Archiregmand Golator Lasgia. She smiled, she took him by the hand, she led him to a place of cascading fountains where cool spray drifted through the air, and there they put their clothing aside and bathed, and rose naked from the sweet-scented pool, and strolled, feet barely touching the ground, into a garden of plants with arching stems and great glistening many-lobed leaves. Without words she encouraged him onward, along shadowy avenues bordered by rows of close-planted trees. Golator Lasgia moved just ahead of him, an elusive and tantalizing figure, floating only inches out of his reach and then gradually widening the distance to feet and yards. At first it seemed hardly a difficult task to overtake her, but he made no headway at it, and had to move faster and faster to keep within sight of her. Her rich olive-hued skin gleamed by early moonlight, and she glanced back often, smiling brilliantly, tossing her head to urge him to keep up. But he could not. She was nearly an entire length of the garden ahead of him now. With growing desperation he impelled himself toward her, but she was dwindling, disappearing, so far ahead of him now that he could barely see the play of muscles beneath her glowing bare skin, and as he rushed from one pathway of the garden to the next he became aware of an increase in the temperature, a sudden and steady change in the air, for somehow the sun was rising here in the night and its full force was striking his shoulders. The trees were wilting and drooping. Leaves were falling. He struggled to remain upright. Golator Lasgia was only a dot on the horizon now, still beckoning to him, still smiling, still tossing her head, but she grew smaller and smaller, and the sun was still climbing, growing stronger, searing, incinerating, withering everything within its reach. Now the garden was a place of gaunt bare branches and rough cracked arid soil. A dreadful thirst had come over him, but there was no water here, and when he saw figures lurking behind the blistered and blackened trees — Metamorphs, they were, subtle tricky creatures that would not hold their shapes still, but flickered and flowed in a maddening way — he called out to them for some-

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hing to drink, and was given only ight tinkling laughter to ease his dry- ıess. He staggered on. The fierce puls- ng light in the heavens was beginning o roast him; he felt his skin hardening, crackling, crisping, splitting. Another moment of this and he would be char- red. What had become of Golator Las- gia? Where were the smiling, bowing, starburst-making townspeople? He saw no garden now. He was in the de- sert, lurching and stumbling through a torrid baking wasteland where even shadows burned. Now real terror rose in him, for even as he dreamed he felt the pain of the heat, and the part of his soul that was observing all this grew alarmed, thinking that the power of the dream might well be so great as to reach up to injure his physical self. There were tales of such things, people who had perished in their sleep of dreams that had overwhelming force. Although it went against his training to terminate a dream prematurely, al- though he knew he must ordinarily see even the worst of horrors through to its ultimate revelation, Dekkeret con- sidered awakening himself for safety's sake, and nearly did; but then he saw that as a species of cowardice and vow- ed to remain in the dream even if it cost him his life. He was down on his knees now, groveling in the fiery sands, star- ing with strange clarity at mysterious tiny golden-bodied insects that were marching in single file across the rims of the dunes toward him: ants, they were, with ugly swollen jaws, and each in turn clambered up his body and took a tiny nip, the merest bite, and clung and held on, so that within mo- ments thousands of the minute crea- tures were covering his skin. He brush- ed at them but could not dislodge them. Their pincers held and their heads came loose from their bodies: the sand about him was black now with headless ants, but they spread over his skin like a cloak, and he brushed and brushed with greater vig- or while still more ants mounted him and dug their jaws in. He grew weary of brushing at them. It was actually cooler in this cloak of ants, he thought. They shielded him from the worst force of the sun, although they too stung and burned him, but not as pain- fully as did the sun's rays. Would the dream never end? He attempted to take control of it himself, to turn the stream of onrushing ants into a rivulet of cool pure water, but that did not work, and he let himself slip back into the nightmare and went crawling wear- ily onward over the sands.

And gradually Dekkeret became aware that he was no longer dreaming.

There was no boundary between sleep and wakefulness that he could de- tect, except that eventually he realized that his eyes were open and that his two centers of consciousness, the dreamer who observed and the dream- Dekkeret who suffered, had merged in- to one. But he was still in the desert, under the terrible midday sun. He was naked. His skin felt raw and blistered.

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There were ants crawling on him, up his legs as far as his knees, minute pale ants that indeed were nipping their tiny pincers into his flesh. Bewildered, he wondered if he had tumbled into some layer of dream beneath dream, but no, so far as he could tell this was the waking world, this was the authentic desert and he was out in the midst of it. He stood up, brushing the ants away — and as in the dream they gripped him even at the cost of their heads — and looked about for the campsite.

He could not see it. In his sleep he had wandered out onto the bare scorching anvil of the open desert and he was lost. Let this be a dream still, he thought fiercely, and let me awaken from it in the shade of Barjazid's floater. But there was no awakening. Dekkeret understood now how lives were lost in the Desert of Stolen Dreams.

"Barjazid?" he called. *"Barjazid!"*

9.

Echoes came back to him from the distant hills. He called again, two, three times, and listened to the reverberations of his own voice, but heard no reply. How long could he survive out here? An hour? Two? He had no water, no shelter; not even a scrap of clothing. His head was bare to the sun's great blazing eye. It was the hottest part of the day. The landscape looked the same in all directions, flat, a shallow bowl swept by hot winds. He searched for his own footprints, but the trail gave out within yards, for the ground was hard and rocky here and he had left no imprint. The camp might lie anywhere about, hidden from him by the slightest of rises in the terrain. He called out again for help and again heard only echoes. Perhaps if he could find a dune he would bury himself to his neck, and wait out the heat that way, and by darkness he might find the camp by its campfire; but he saw no dunes. If there were a high place here that would give him a sweeping view, he would mount it and search the horizon for the camp. But he saw no hillocks. What would Lord Stiamot do in such a situation, he wondered, or Lord Thimin, or one of the other great warriors of the past? What is Dekkeret going to do? This was a foolish way to die, he thought, a useless, nasty, ugly death. He turned and turned and turned again, scanning every way. No clues; no point in walking at all, not knowing where he was going. He shrugged and crouched in a place where there were no ants. There was no dazzlingly clever ploy that he could use to save himself. There was no inner resource that would bring him, against all the odds, to safety. He had lost himself in his sleep, and he would die just as Golator Lasgia had said he would, and that was all there was to it. Only one thing remained to him, and that was strength of character: he would die quietly and calmly, without tears or anger, without raging against the forces of fate. Perhaps it would take an hour. Perhaps less. The important thing

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was to die honorably, for when death is inevitable there's no sense making a botch of it.

He waited for it to come.

What came instead — ten minutes later, half an hour, an hour, he had no way of knowing — was Serifain Reinaulion. The Vroon appeared like a mirage out of the east, trudging slowly toward Dekkeret struggling under the weight of two flasks of water, and when he was within a hundred yards or so he waved two of his tentacles and called, "Are you alive?"

"More or less. Are you real?"

"Real enough. And we've been searching for you half the afternoon." In a flurry of rubbery limbs the small creature pushed one of the flasks upward into Dekkeret's hands. "Here. Sip it. Don't gulp. *Don't gulp*. You're so dehydrated you'll drown if you're too greedy."

Dekkeret fought the impulse to drain the flask in one long pull. The Vroon was right: sip, sip, be moderate, or harm will come. He let the water trickle into his mouth, swished it around, soaked his swollen tongue in it, finally let it down his throat. *Ah*. Another cautious sip. Another, then a fair swallow. He grew a little dizzy. Serifain Reinaulion beckoned for the flask. Dekkeret shook him off, drank again, rubbed a little of the water against his cheeks and lips.

"How far are we from the camp?" he asked finally.

"Ten minutes. Are you strong enough to walk, or shall I go back for the others?"

"I can walk."

"Let's get started, then."

Dekkeret nodded. "One more little sip—"

"Carry the flask. Drink whenever you like. If you get weak, tell me and we'll rest. Remember, I can't carry you."

The Vroon headed off slowly toward a low sandy ridge perhaps five hundred yards to the east. Feeling wobbly and lightheaded, Dekkeret followed, and was surprised to see the ground trending upward; the ridge was not all that low, he realized, but some trick of the glare had made him think otherwise. In fact it rose to two or three times his own height, high enough to conceal two lesser ridges on the far side. The floater was parked in the shadow of the farther one.

Barjazid was the only person at the camp. He glanced up at Dekkeret with what looked like contempt or annoyance in his eyes and said, "Went for a stroll, did you? At noontime?"

"Sleepwalking. The dream-stealers had me. It was like being under a spell." Dekkeret was shivering as the sunburn began to disrupt his body's heat-shedding systems. He dropped down alongside the floater and huddled under a light robe. "When I woke I couldn't see camp. I was sure that I would die."

"Half an hour more and you would have. You must be two-thirds fried as

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it is. Lucky for you my boy woke up and saw that you had disappeared."

Dekkeret pulled the robe tighter around him. "Is that how they die out here? By sleepwalking at midday?"

"One of the ways, yes."

"I owe you my life."

"You've owed me your life since we crossed Khulag Pass. Going on your own you'd have been dead fifty times already. But thank the Vroon, if you have to thank anyone. He did the real work of finding you."

Dekkeret nodded. "Where's your son? And Khaymak Gran? Out looking for me also?"

"On their way back," said Barjazid. And indeed the Skandar and the boy appeared only moments later. Without a glance at him the Skandar flung herself down on her sleeping-mat; Dinitak Barjazid grinned slyly at Dekkeret and said, "Had a pleasant walk?"

"Not very. I regret the inconvenience I caused you."

"As do we."

"Perhaps I should sleep tied down from now on."

"Or with a heavy weight sitting on your chest," Dinitak suggested. He yawned. "Try to stay put until sundown, at least. Will you?"

"So I intend," said Dekkeret.

But it was impossible for him to fall asleep. His skin itched in a thousand places from the bites of the insects, and the sunburn, despite a cooling ointment that Serifain Reinaulion gave him, made him miserable. There was a dry, dusty feeling in his throat that no amount of water seemed to cure, and his eyes throbbed painfully. As though probing an irritating sore he ran through his memories of his desert ordeal again and again — the dream, the heat, the ants, the thirst, the awareness of imminent death. Rigorously he searched for moments of cowardice and found none. Dismay, yes, and anger, and discomfort, but he had no recollection of panic or fear. Good. Good. The worst part of the experience, he decided, had not been the heat and thirst and peril but the dream, the dark and disturbing dream, the dream that had once again begun in joy and midway had undergone a somber metamorphosis. To be denied the solace of healthy dreams is a kind of death-in-life, he thought, far worse than perishing in a desert, for dying occupies only a single moment but dreaming affects all of one's time to come. And what knowledge was it that these bleak Suvraelu dreams were imparting? Dekkeret knew that when dreams came from the Lady they must be studied intently, if necessary with the aid of one who practices the art of dream-speaking, for they contain information vital to the proper conduct of one's life; but these dreams were hardly of the Lady, seeming rather to emanate from some other dark Power, some sinister and oppressive force more adept at taking than giving. Shapeshifters? It could be. What if some tribe of them had, through deceit, obtained one of the de-

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vices by which the Lady of the Isle is able to reach the minds of her flock, and lurked here in the hot heartland of Suvrael preying on unwary travelers, stealing from their souls, draining their vitality, imposing an unknown and unfathomable revenge one by one upon those who had stolen their world? Dekkeret saw now how important it was for him to survive this journey. He had to bring to the government word of a danger in this land far more serious than a mere trade imbalance.

As the afternoon shadows lengthened he found himself at last slipping back into sleep. He fought it, fearing the touch of the invisible intruders on his soul once again. Desperately he held his eyes open, staring across the darkening wasteland and listening to the eerie hum and buzz of the desert-sounds; but it was impossible to fend off exhaustion longer. He drifted into a light, uneasy slumber, broken from time to time by dreams that he sensed came neither from the Lady nor from any other external force, but merely floated randomly through the strata of his mind, bits of patternless incident and stray incomprehensible images. And then someone was shaking him awake — the Vroon, he realized. Dekkeret's mind was foggy and slow. he felt numbed. His lips were cracked, his back was sore. Night had fallen, and his companions were already at work closing down their camp. Serifain Reinaulion offerd Dekkeret a cup of some sweet thick blue-green juice, and he drank it in a single draught.

"Come," the Vroon said. "Time to be going onward."

10.

Now the desert changed again and the landscape grew violent and rough. Evidently there had been great earthquakes here, and more than one, for the land lay fractured and upheaved, with mighty blocks of the desert floor piled at unlikely angles against others, and huge sprawls of talus at the feet of the low shattered cliffs. Through this chaotic zone of turbulence and disruption there was only a single passable route — the wide, gently curving bed of a long-extinct river whose sandy floor swerved in long easy bends between the cracked and sundered rock-heaps. The large moon was full and there was almost a daylight brilliance to the grotesque scene. After some hours of passing through a terrain so much the same from one mile to the next that it seemed almost as though the floater were not moving at all, Dekkeret turned to Barjazid and said, "And how long will it be before we reach Ghyzyn Kor?"

"This valley marks the boundary between desert and grazing-lands." Barjazid pointed toward the southwest, where the riverbed vanished between two towering craggy peaks that rose like daggers from the desert floor. "Beyond that place — Munnerak Notch — the climate is altogether different. On the far side of the mountain

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wall sea-fogs enter by night from the west, and the land is green and fit for grazing. We will camp halfway to the Notch tomorrow, and pass through it the day after. By Seaday at the latest you'll be at your lodgings in Ghyzyn Kor."

"And you?" Dekkeret asked.

"My son and I have business elsewhere in the area. We'll return to Ghyzyn Kor for you after — three days? Five?"

"Five should be sufficient."

"Yes. And then the return journey."

"By the same route?"

"There is no other," said Barjazid. "They explained to you in Tolaghai, did they not, that access to the rangelands was cut off, except by way of this desert? But why should you fear this route? The dreams aren't so awful, are they? And so long as you do no more roaming in your sleep, you'll not be in any danger here."

It sounded simple enough. Indeed he felt sure he could survive the trip; but last night's dream had been torment enough, and he looked without cheer upon what might yet come. When they made camp the next morning Dekkeret found himself again uneasy about entrusting himself to sleep at all. For the first hour of the rest-period he kept himself awake, listening to the metallic clangor of the bare tumbled rocks as they stretched and quivered in the midday heat, until at last sleep came up over his mind like a dense black cloud and took him unawares.

And in time a dream possessed him, and it was, he knew at its outset, going to be the most terrible of all.

Pain came first — an ache, a twinge, a pang, then without warning a racking explosion of dazzling light against the walls of his skull, making him grunt and clutch his head. The agonizing spasm passed swiftly, though, and he felt the soft sleek presence of Golator Lasgia about him, soothing him, cradling him against her breasts. She rocked him and murmured to him and eased him until he opened his eyes and sat up and looked around, and saw that he was out of the desert, free of Suvrael itself. He and Golator Lasgia were in some cool forest glade where giant trees with perfectly straight yellow-barked trunks rose to incomprehensible heights, and a swiftly flowing stream, studded with rocky outcroppings, tumbled and roared wildly past almost at their feet. Beyond the stream the land dropped sharply away, revealing a distant valley, and, on the far side of it, a great gray saw-toothed snow-capped mountain which Dekkeret recognized instantly as one of the nine vast peaks of the Khyntor Marches.

"No," he said. "This is not where I want to be."

Golator Lasgia laughed, and the pretty tinkling sound of it was somehow sinister in his ears, like the delicate sounds the desert made at twilight. "But this is a dream, good friend!

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You must take what comes, in dreams!"

"I will direct my dream. I have no wish to return to the Khyntor Marches. Look: the scene changes. We are on the Zimr, approaching the river's great bend. See? See? The city of Ni-moya sparkling there before us?"

Indeed he saw the huge city, white against the green backdrop of forested hills. But Golator Lasgia shook her head.

"There is no city here, my love. There is only the northern forest. Feel the wind? Listen to the song of the stream. Here — kneel, scoop up the fallen needles on the ground. Ni-moya is far away, and we are here to hunt."

"I beg you, let us be in Ni-moya."

"Another time," said Golator Lasgia.

He could not prevail. The magical towers of Ni-moya wavered and grew transparent and were gone, and there remained only the yellow-boled trees, the chilly breezes, the sounds of the forest. Dekkeret trembled. He was the prisoner of this dream and there was no escape.

And now five hunters in rough black haigus-hide robes appeared and made perfunctory gestures of deference and held forth weapons to him, the blunt dull tube of an energy-thrower and a short sparkling poniard and a blade of a longer kind with a hooked tip. He shook his head, and one of the hunters came close and grinned mockingly at him, a gap-toothed grin out of a wide mouth stinking from dried fish. Dekkeret recognized her face, and looked away in shame, for she was the hunter who had died on that other day in the Khyntor Marches a thousand thousand years ago. If only she were not here now, he thought, the dream might be bearable. But this was diabolical torture, to force him to live through all this once again.

Golator Lasgia said, "Take the weapons from here. The steetmoy are running and we must be after them."

"I have no wish to—"

"What folly, to think that dreams respect wishes! The dream *is* your wish. Take the weapons."

Dekkeret understood. With chilled fingers he accepted the blades and the energy-thrower and stowed them in the proper places of his belt. The hunters smiled and grunted things at him in the thick harsh dialect of the north. Then they began to run along the bank of the stream, moving in easy loping bounds, touching the ground no more than one stride out of five; and willy-nilly Dekkeret ran with them, clumsily at first, then with much the same floating grace. Golator Lasgia, by his side, kept pace easily, her dark hair fluttering about her face, her eyes bright with excitement. They turned left, into the heart of the forest, and fanned out in a crescent formation that widened and curved inward to confront the prey.

The prey! Dekkeret could see three white-furred steetmoy gleaming like lanterns deep in the forest. The beasts

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prowled uneasily, growling, aware of intruders but still unwilling to abandon their territory — big creatures, possibly the most dangerous wild animals on Majipoor, quick and powerful and cunning, the terrors of the northlands. Dekkeret drew his poniard. Killing steetmoy with energy-throwers was no sport, and might damage too much of their valuable fur besides: one was supposed to get to close range and kill them with one's blade, preferably the poniard, if necessary the hooked machete.

The hunters looked to him. Pick one, they were saying, choose your quarry. Dekkeret nodded. The middle one, he indicated. They were smiling coldly. What did they know that they were not telling him? It had been like this that other time, too, the barely concealed scorn of the mountain folk for the pampered lordlings who were seeking deadly amusements in their forests; and that outing had ended badly. Dekkeret hefted his poniard. The dream-steetmoy that moved nervously beyond those trees were implausibly enormous, great heavy-haunched immensities that clearly could not be slain by one man alone, wielding only handweapons, but here there was no turning back, for he knew himself to be bound upon whatever destiny the dream offered him. Now with hunting-horns and hand-clapping the hired hunters commenced to stampede the prey. The steetmoy, angered and baffled by the sudden blaring strident sounds, rose high, whirled, raked trees with their claws, swung around, and more in disgust than fear began to run.

The chase was on.

Dekkeret knew that the hunters were separating the animals, driving the two rejected ones away to allow him a clear chance at the one he had chosen. But he looked neither to the right nor the left. Accompanied by Golator Lasgia and one of the hunters, he rushed forward, giving pursuit as the steetmoy in the center went rumbling and crashing through the forest. This was the worst part, for although humans were faster, steetmoy were better able to break through barriers of underbrush, and he might well lose his quarry altogether in the confusions of the run. The forest here was fairly open; but the steetmoy was heading for cover, and soon Dekkeret found himself struggling past saplings and vines and low brush, barely able to keep the retreating white phantom in view. With singleminded intensity he ran and hacked with the machete and clambered through thickets. It was all so terribly familiar, so much of an old story, especially when he realized that the steetmoy was doubling back, was looping through the trampled part of the forest as if planning a counterattack—

The moment would soon be at hand, the dreaming Dekkeret knew, when the maddened animal would blunder upon the gap-toothed hunter, would seize the mountain woman and

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hurl her against a tree, and Dekkeret, unwilling or unable to halt, would go plunging onward, continuing the chase, leaving the woman where she lay, so that when the squat thick-snouted scavenging beast emerged from its hole and began to rip her belly apart there would be no one to defend her, and only later, when things were more quiet and there was time to go back for the injured hunter, would he begin to regret the callous uncaring focus of concentration that had allowed him to ignore his fallen companion for the sake of keeping sight of his prey. And afterward the shame, the guilt, the unending self-accusations — yes, he would go through all that again as he lay here asleep in the stifling heat of the Suvrael desert, would he not?

No.

No, it was not that simple at all, for the language of dreams is complex, and in the thick mists that suddenly enfolded the forest Dekkeret saw the steetmoy swing around and lash the gap-toothed woman and knock her flat, but the woman rose and spat out a few bloody teeth and laughed, and the chase continued, or rather it twisted back on itself to the same point, the steetmoy bursting forth unexpectedly from the darkest part of the woods and striking at Dekkeret himself, knocking his poniard and his machete from his hands, rearing high overhead for the death-blow, but not delivering it, for the image changed and it was Golator Lasgia who lay beneath the plunging claws while Dekkeret wandered aimlessly nearby, unable to move in any useful direction, and then it was the huntswoman who was the victim once more, and Dekkeret again, and suddenly and improbably old pinch-faced Barjazid, and then Golator Lasgia. As Dekkeret watched, a voice at his elbow said, "What does it matter? We each owe the Divine a death. Perhaps it was more important for you then to follow your prey." Dekkeret stared. The voice was the voice of the gap-toothed hunter. The sound of it left him dazed and shaking. The dream was becoming bewildering. He struggled to penetrate its mysteries.

Now he saw Barjazid standing at his side in the dark cool forest glade. The steetmoy once more was savaging the mountain woman.

"Is this the way it truly was?" Barjazid said.

"I suppose. I didn't see it."

"What did you do?"

"Kept on going. I didn't want to lose the animal."

"You killed it?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"Came back. And found her. Like that—"

Dekkeret pointed. The snuffling scavenger was astride the woman. Golator Lasgia stood nearby, arms folded, smiling.

"And then?"

"The others came. They buried their companion. We skinned the steet-

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moy and rode back to camp."

"And then? And then? And then?"

"Who are you? Why are you asking me this?"

Dekkeret had a flashing view of himself beneath the scavenger's fanged snout.

Barjazid said, "You were ashamed?"

"Of course. I put the pleasures of my sport ahead of a human life."

"You had no way of knowing she was injured."

"I sensed it. I saw it, but I didn't let myself see it, do you understand? I knew she was hurt. I kept on going."

"Who cared?"

"I cared."

"Did her tribesmen seem to care?"

"I cared."

"And so? And so? And so?"

"It mattered to me. Other things matter to them."

"You felt guilty?"

"Of course."

"You *are* guilty. Of youth, of foolishness, of naivete."

"And are you my judge?"

"Of course I am," said Barjazid. "See my face?" He tugged at his seamed weatherbeaten jowls, pulled and twisted until his leathery desert-tanned skin began to split, and the face ripped away like a mask, revealing another face beneath, a hideous ironic distorted face twisted with convulsive mocking laughter, and the other face was Dekkeret's own.

* * *

11.

In that moment Dekkeret experienced a sensation as of a bright needle of piercing light driving downward through the roof of his skull. It was the most intense pain he had ever known, a sudden intolerable spike of racking anguish that burned through his brain with monstrous force. It lit a flare in his consciousness by whose baleful light he saw himself grimly illuminated, fool, romantic, boy, sole inventor of a drama about which no one else cared, inventing a tragedy that had an audience of one, seeking purgation for a sin without context, which was no sin at all except perhaps the sin of self-indulgence. In the midst of his agony Dekkeret heard a great gong tolling far away and the dry rasping sound of Barjazid's demonic laughter; then with a sudden wrenching twist he pulled free of sleep and rolled over, quivering, shaken, still afflicted by the lancing thrust of the pain, although it was beginning to fade as the last bonds of sleep dropped from him.

He struggled to rise and found himself enveloped in thick musky fur, as if the steetmoy had seized him and were crushing him against its breast. Powerful arms gripped him — *four* arms, he realized, and as Dekkeret completed the journey up out of dreams he understood that he was in the embrace of the giant Skandar woman, Khaymak Gran. Probably he had been crying out in his sleep, thrashing and flailing about, and as he scrambled to his feet

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she had decided he was off on another sleepwalking excursion and was determined to prevent him from going. She was hugging him with rib-cracking force.

"It's all right," he muttered, tight against her heavy gray pelt. "I'm awake! I'm not going anywhere!"

Still she clung to him.

"You're — hurting — me—"

He fought for breath. In her great awkward solicitousness she was apt to kill him with motherly kindness. Dekkeret pushed, even kicked, twisted, hammered at her with his head. Somehow as he wriggled in her grasp he threw her off balance, and they toppled together, she beneath him; at the last moment her arms opened, allowing Dekkeret to spin away. He landed on both knees and crouched where he fell, aching in a dozen places and befuddled by all that had happened in the last few moments. But not so befuddled that when he stood up he failed to see Barjazid, on the far side of the floater, hastily removing some sort of mechanism from his forehead, some slender crownlike circlet, and attempting to conceal it in a compartment of the floater.

"What was that?" Dekkeret demanded.

Barjazid looked uncharacteristically flustered. "Nothing. A toy, only."

"Let me see."

Barjazid seemed to signal. Out of the corner of his eye Dekkeret saw Khaymak Gran getting to her feet and beginning to reach for him again, but before the ponderous Skandar could manage it Dekkeret had skipped out of the way and darted around the floater to Barjazid's side. The little man was still busy with his intricate bit of machinery. Dekkeret, looming over him as the Skandar had loomed over Dekkeret, swiftly caught Barjazid's hand and yanked it up behind his back. Then he plucked the mechanism from its storage case and examined it.

Everyone was awake now. The Vroon stared goggle-eyed at what was going on; and young Dinitak, producing a knife that was not much unlike the one in Dekkeret's dream, glared up at him and said, "Let go of my father."

Dekkeret swung Barjazid around to serve as a shield.

"Tell your son to put that blade away," he said.

Barjazid was silent.

Dekkeret said, "He drops the blade or I smash this thing in my hand. Which?"

Barjazid gave the order in a low growling tone. Dinitak pitched the knife into the sand almost at Dekkeret's feet, and Dekkeret, taking one step forward, pulled it to him and kicked it behind him. He dangled the mechanism in Barjazid's face: a thing of gold and crystal and ivory, elaborately fashioned, with mysterious wires and connections.

"What is this?" Dekkeret said.

"I told you. A toy. Please — give it to me, before you break it."

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"What is the function of this toy?"

"It amuses me while I sleep," said Barjazid hoarsely.

"In what way?"

"It enhances my dreams and makes them more interesting."

Dekkeret took a closer look at it. "If I put it on, will it enhance my dreams?"

"It will only harm you, Initiate."

"Tell me what it does for you."

"That is very hard to describe," Barjazid said.

"Work at it. Strive to find the words. How did you become a figure in my dream, Barjazid. You had no business being in that particular dream."

The little man shrugged. He said uncomfortably, "Was I in your dream? Anyone can be in anybody's dream."

"I think this machine may have helped put you there. And may have helped you know what I was dreaming."

Barjazid responded only with glum silence.

Dekkeret said, "Describe the workings of this machine, or I'll grind it to scrap in my hand."

"Please—"

Dekkeret's thick strong fingers closed on one of the most fragile-looking parts of the device. Barjazid sucked in his breath; his body went taut in Dekkeret's grip.

"Well?" Dekkeret said.

"Your guess is right. It — it lets me enter sleeping minds."

"Truly? Where did you get such a thing?"

"My own invention. A notion that I have been perfecting over a number of years."

"Like the machines of the Lady of the Isle?"

"Different. More powerful. She can only speak to minds; I can read dreams, control the shame of them, take command of a person's sleeping mind to a great degree."

"And this device is entirely of your own making. Not stolen from the Isle."

"Mine alone,' Barjazid murmured.

A torrent of rage surged through Dekkeret. For an instant he wanted to crush Barjazid's machine in one quick squeeze and then to grind Barjazid himself to pulp. Remembering all of Barjazid's half-truths and evasions and outright lies, thinking of the way Barjazid had meddled in his dreams, how he had wantonly distorted and transformed the healing rest Dekkeret so sorely needed, how he interposed layers of fears and torments and uncertainties into that Lady-sent gift, his own true blissful rest, Dekkeret felt an almost murderous fury at having been invaded and manipulated in this fashion. His heart pounded, his throat went dry, his vision blurred. His hand tightened on Barjazid's bent arm until the small man whimpered and mewed. Harder — harder — break it off—

No.

Dekkeret reached some inner peak of anger and held himself there a mo-

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ment, and then let himself descend the farther slope toward tranquility. Gradually he regained his steadiness, caught his breath, eased the drumming in his chest. He held tight to Barjazid until he felt altogether calm. Then he released the little man and shoved him forward against the floater. Barjazid staggered and clung to the vehicle's curving side. All color seemed to have drained from his face. Tenderly he rubbed his bruised arm, and glanced up at Dekkeret with an expression that seemed to be compounded equally of terror and pain and resentment.

With care Dekkeret studied the curious instrument, gently rubbing the tips of his fingers over its elegant and complicated parts. Then he moved as if to put it on his own forehead.

Barjazid gasped. "Don't!"

"What will happen? Will I damage it?"

"You will. And yourself as well."

Dekkeret nodded. He doubted that Barjazid was bluffing, but he did not care to find out.

After a moment he said, "There are no Shapeshifter dream-stealers hiding in this desert, is that right?"

"That is so," Barjazid whispered.

"Only you, secretly experimenting on the minds of other travelers. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And causing them to die."

"No," Barjazid said. "I intended no deaths. If they died, it was because they became alarmed, became confused, because they panicked and ran off into dangerous places — because they began to wander in their sleep, as you did—"

"But they died because you had meddled in their minds."

"Who can be sure of that? Some died, some did not. I had no desire to have anyone perish. Remember, when *you* wandered away, we searched diligently for you."

"I had hired you to guide and protect me," said Dekkeret. "The others were innocent strangers whom you preyed on from afar, is that not so?"

Barjazid was silent.

"You knew that people were dying as a direct result of your experiments, and you went on experimenting."

Barjazid shrugged.

"How long were you doing this?"

"Several years."

"And for what reason?"

Barjazid looked toward the side. "I told you once, I would never answer a question of that sort."

"And if I break your machine?"

"You will break it anyway."

"Not so," Dekkeret replied. "Here. Take it."

"What?"

Dekkeret extended his hand, with the dream-machine resting on his palm. "Go on. Take it. Put it away. I don't want the thing."

"You're not going to kill me?" Barjazid said in wonder.

"Am I your judge? If I catch you using that device on me again, I'll kill you sure enough. but otherwise, no.

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Killing is not my sport. I have one sin on my soul as it is. And I need you to get me back to Tolaghai, or have you forgotten that?"

"Of course. Of course." Barjazid looked astounded at Dekkeret's mercy.

Dekkeret said, "Why would I want to kill you?"

"For entering your mind — for interfering with your dreams—"

"Ah."

"For putting your life at risk on the desert."

"That too."

"And yet you aren't eager for vengeance?"

Dekkeret shook his head. "You took great liberties with my soul, and that angered me, but the anger is past and done with. I won't punish you. We've had a transaction, you and I, and I've had my money's worth from you, and this thing of yours has been of value to me." He leaned close and said in a low, earnest voice, "I came to Suvrael full of doubt and confusion and guilt, looking to purge myself through physical suffering. That was foolishness. Physical suffering makes the body uncomfortable and strengthens the will, but it does little for the wounded spirit. You gave me something else. You tormented me in dreams and held up a mirror to my soul, and I saw myself clearly. How much of that last dream were you really able to read, Barjazid?"

"You were in a forest — hunting. One of your companions was injured by an animal, yes? Is that it?"

"Go on."

"And you ignored her. You continued the chase. And afterward, when you went back to see about her, it was too late, and you blamed yourself for her death. I sensed the great guilt in you. I felt the power of it radiating from you."

"Yes," Dekkeret said. "Guilt that I'll bear forever. But there's nothing that can be done for her now, is there?" An astonishing calmness had spread through him. He was not altogether sure what had happened, except that in his dream he had confronted the events of the Khyntor forest at last, and had faced the truth of what he had done there and what he had not done, had understood, in a way that he could not define in words, that it was folly to flagellate himself for all his lifetime over a single act of carelessness and unfeeling stupidity, that the moment had come to put aside all self-accusation and get on with the business of his life. The process of forgiving himself was under way. He had come to Suvrael to be purged and somehow he had accomplished that. And he owed Barjazid thanks for that favor. To Barjazid he said, "I might have saved her, or maybe not; but my mind was elsewhere, and in my foolishness I passed her by to make my kill. But wallowing in guilt is no useful means of atonement, eh, Barjazid? The dead are dead. My services must be offered to the living. Come: turn this floater and let's

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begin heading back toward Tolaghai."

"What about your visit to the rangelands? What about Ghyzyn Kor?"

"A silly mission. It no longer matters, these questions of meat shortages and trade imbalances. Those problems are already solved. Take me to Tolaghai."

"And then?"

"You will come with me to Castle Mount. To demonstrate your toy before the Coronal."

"No!" Barjazid cried in horror. He looked genuinely frightened for the first time since Dekkeret had known him. "I beg you—"

"Father?" said Dinitak.

Under the midday sun the boy seemed ablaze with light. There was a wild and fiery look of pride on his face.

"Father, go with him to Castle Mount. Let him show his masters what we have here."

Barjazid moistened his lips. "I fear—"

"Fear nothing. Our time is now beginning."

Dekkeret looked from one to the other, from the suddenly timid and shrunken old man to the transfigured and glowing boy. He sensed that historic things were happening, that mighty forces were shifting out of balance and into a new configuration, and this he barely comprehended, except to know that his destinies and those of these desert folk were tied in some way together; and the dream-reading machine that Barjazid had created was the thread that bound their lives.

Barjazid said huskily, "What will happen to me on Castle Mount, then?"

"I have no idea," said Dekkeret. "Perhaps they'll take your head and mount it atop Lord Ossier's Parapet. Or perhaps you'll find yourself set up on high as a Power of Majipoor. Anything might happen. How would I know?" He realized that he did not care, that he was indifferent to Barjazid's fate, that he felt no anger at all toward this seedy little tinkerer with minds, but only a kind of perverse abstract gratitude for Barjazid's having helped rid him of his own demons. "These matters are in the Coronal's hands. But one thing is certain, that you will go with me to the Mount, and this machine of yours with us. Come, now, turn the floater, to Tolaghai."

"It is still daytime," Barjazid muttered. "The heat of the day rages at its highest."

"We'll manage. Come: get us moving, and fast! We have a ship to catch in Tolaghai, and there's a woman in that city I want to see again, before we set sail!"

12.

These events happened in the young manhood of him who was to become the Coronal Lord Dekkeret in the pontificate of Prestimion. And it was the boy Dinitak Barjazid who would be the first to rule in Suvrael over the minds of all the sleepers of Majipoor, with the title of King of Dreams.

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Books

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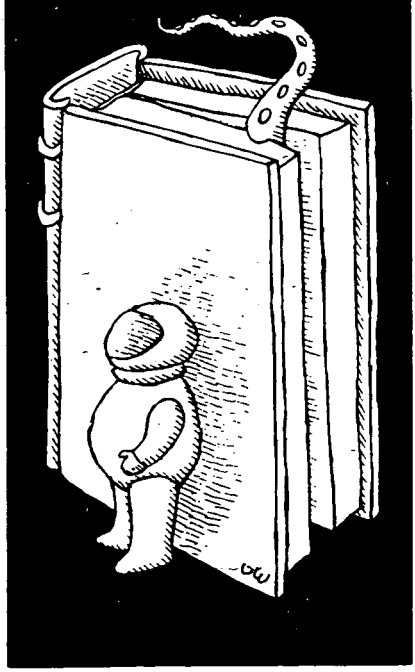

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Claw of the Conciliator, Gene Wolfe. Simon & Schuster/Timescape. $11.95

Far From Home, Walter S. Tevis. Doubleday, $9.95

Shatterday, Harlan Ellison. Houghton Mifflin, $11.95

The Science Fictionary, Ed Naha. Seaview Books, $16.95

The major news, of course, is the appearance of *The Claw of the Conciliator*, the second volume in Gene Wolfe's Book of The New Sun tetralogy, the most promising long-term project currently underway in SF.

Claw continues the adventures of Severian, the itinerant inquisitor and headsman whom we met as a young apprentice in *Shadow of The Torturer*, in a world so far evolved beyond our time that everything looks like an Aubrey Beardsley illustration. Severian, having half-intentionally snatched the Claw from the Cathedral of the Pelerines in the first book, has begun to use it, haphazardly and tentatively, in this volume. The Claw — a jewel-like artifact(?) which he carries concealed in his boot-top — seems at times to have healing and otherwise mitigating powers.

Severian's progress in life is still, as this volume ends, almost totally controlled by circumstance. He is obsessed by intermittent searches for Agia, Dorcas, and Jolenta — all variously motivated women he has encountered and then parted or been parted from — and by his overwhelming fixation on the

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Chatelaine Thecla, his great lost first love, whom, as you may recall, he guarded and served while she was held in the Guild tower, and whom he helped commit suicide after she had been tortured to a point of mental as well as physical impairment.

The problem being that she committed suicide offstage, as it were, and he continues to grasp at the possibility that somehow, somewhere, she yet lives. This possibility continues in his mind even after the seemingly conclusive ceremony with Thecla's corporeal-zation in this present portion of the narrative. In between times, Severian supports himself by practicing his trade from town to town.

Further I will not tell you much; I strongly recommend that you will be missing a major — a seminal — event in the development of SF if you don't allow yourself the pleasure of reading this book and its predecessor, and that as long as you do so in the privacy of your mind, the enjoyment will not count against you socially.

As a piece of literature, this work is simply overwhelming. Severian is a character realized in a depth and to a breadth we have never seen in SF before; of all unlikely things, a detailed, likeable portrait of the skilled artisan as a young man is emerging here; courageous, professional — distasteful of the slavering onlookers as he breaks his victims' thighs deftly — rather wise but certainly unsophisticated, he is still being led around by his private parts. But that will change.

As a piece of craftsmanship, the work so far is so good that some of Wolfe's moves cannot be analyzed. All writing, fiction more than the rest, is organized illusion. We who are also in that guild each have a working knowledge of how illusion is generated, sustained, and brought to a climax. When we read the work of others, we can invariably detect how they do it, even when they don't do it the way we would. Or so I have always thought.

No more. I am in the presence of a practitioner whose moves I cannot follow; I see only the same illusions that are seen by those outside the guild. I know the cards are up the sleeve somewhere, but there are clearly extra arms to this person. I know the rabbit has been in the hat all along, but an instant ago the man had no hat. And though I saw him slip a rabbit at the last instant into a compartment that could hold only a rabbit, a gyrfalcon has come out.

And mind you, as crattsmanship and as literature, what we're talking about are attributes that are world-class as *prose*, not "just" as SF; we are in no further need of proof that "genre" SF is not essentially limited to genre standards. There's no question any longer but that all we were waiting for was practitioners smart enough and gifted enough.

As SF, *Claw* unveils a few mysteries left shrouded in *Shadow*. It now seems possible to be sure that the set-

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ting is Earth in a very far future — the accompanying news release says 'a million years,' which seems to be the handout writer's own guess and which may not be of a sufficient magnitude. We learn — or at least I learned — for the first time that some of the ruling class have access to air transportation. There appear to be several major facts which Wolfe is only now letting us in on, but which, as we look back, were implied in the earlier book or even stated, but stated in such a way that they didn't distract us.

As SF, it also sets out a little array of traditional SF ideas turned inside-out; grace notes, perhaps, to remind us that Wolfe is after all an SF reader of long standing, and appreciates the fact that much SF reading is done for the sake of such bright touches. I will tell you just one — the appearance of an intelligent, self-volitional robot who, mangled in a severe accident, had to have some of his parts replaced by fleshy segments, on a temporary, emergency basis. An orgcyb, if you please.

As a segment in a larger work, *Claw*, honest segment that it is, intertwines seamlessly with *Shadow*, fulfilling some of the temporarily disconnected threadings in the earlier volume. Dorcas, for instance, is developing nicely. New threads are also appearing; how can constant contact with the Claw not be affecting Severian himself? But when *Claw* has reached its natural length, it stops. We can clearly be sure that part Three is waiting to receive it as faultlessly as it has coupled into Part One, but Wolfe is not being Dashiel Hammett, writing *The Dain Curse* with three false climaxes in order to satisfy readers who have come in at midpoint or might not have the patience to wait for next month's episode. We are not going to know whether *The Book of The New Sun* is a "good" book — ie., a totally understandable illusion with a suitably grand climax — until all four parts are in our hands. At that point, the best thing to do will be to re-read the first three before reading the fourth. And, very likely, to then pause for an interval, ruminate, and go back and read it all again.

This is not the sort of exercise which is normally sufficiently rewarding to be justified. And very rare is the work in which I'd recommend placing the faith to contemplate doing so much work as a reader. In reviewing *Shadow*, I promised you that such patience was, for once, very likely to be justified. What we have in *Claw* is further documentation that it will be. The rule of thumb is that any writer who demands this sort of thing from his readers is promulgating an arrogant imposition. But Wolfe is not all thumbs.

Who else — who else, I ask you — would have *both* the charm and the self-confidence to close *Claw* with the statement that he would hardly blame you if at this point you stopped reading the account forever? And the thing

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is, he's not even setting the hook by doing that. He's just doing it. At least, I think he's just doing it. It will probably turn out to be a harpoon from which he distracted us by waving a hook.

And I close by pointing out David Hartwell's own courage as Simon & Schuster/Pocket's SF editor in pushing this project through his house(s), and his perspicacity in realizing that, as an incident in the publication of the work, the emergence of Gene Wolfe as a notable figure in world literature is assured.

And now Walter S. Tevis. *The Hustler* was originally a short story. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* — a novel which not enough people are fully aware of but Bantam is re-issuing just about now — is finally unsatisfactory as a novel to the extent that it is essentially an expanded short story. *Mockingbird* — I know; you're supposed to think it was good; haven't lots of people, me excluded, raved about it for you? — was a pasteup of short stories, whether Tevis thought he was using some other method or not. All right, here is a short story collection, and, sure enough, Tevis is one of those rare writers who should never do anything but short stories. He is a Benet, a Collier, a Knight, a Bradbury, an Ellison, in contradistinction to a Wolfe who may now and then do some shorter work but is clearly by God's intention someone who should buy all his paper by the ream.

Tevis, and his kin, can do it on visiting cards, "it" being a pellucid talent for the telling instance captured in midcaracole.

Far From Home takes its title from the conventional, if memorable and striking SF short story first published here some years ago. Half the book contains reprinted material from the SF magazines and other media in which Tevis has displayed his established talent for doing the conventional uncommonly. But the other half contains new stories, or at least stories from a mode new for Tevis and scarce in our pages. They are a form of writing in which the characters *and* the setting are both fundamentally unconventionalized ... meta-SF; the mode in which Calvino, Borges and Strete work.

"A Visit From Mother," all by itself, is worth the price of the book to have read. Mind you, you may not like it — but you will be tickled by it, and you won't forget it. Much the same goes for "Rent Control" and "Out of Luck." Others are not as good. "Daddy" is a counterpart of "Mother," and a weak one. The sense is that Tevis had some stories he wasn't sure of, and some he'd been keeping around until he could trust them, put them all in one box, and send them off to Doubleday.

But that, too, is an engaging feature in this case. What we get the effect of having is a series of events in a writer's evolution. Enough of them are successful on their own terms to be fully rewarding. One or two, as noted, are extraordinary.

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* * *

Harlan Ellison's another one, of course. *Shatterday* collects some of the best short stories of Ellison's recent period (1977 and up), including some from here — "Jeffty is Five," "Alive and Well on a Friendless Voyage," and "All the Lies That Are my Life." Others were written as radio readings, or appeared in other obscure or ephemeral media, and so are not likely to be at all familiar.

The book is beautiful as an object in itself — skillfully designed, and graced by the latest in the series of Dillon dustjackets which mark the book publications of Ellison's work. This, too, is an expression of Ellison; he became interested and active in book design back in the late 1950s, and takes a strong hand with all his publishers in that respect as well as all the others.

He is a remarkable writer. As I've said on earlier occasion, the quintessential SF short story writer of his time, which falls after Bradbury's time. What I want to stress now is that part of that quintessence, which has many parts, lies in his burgeoning demand that he be treated as a writer, just plain a writer, some of whose work finds a home in SF media but all of which is in fact part of a larger literary construct.

This has always been true, of course; from the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s, onward. At no time were the "genre" confines of SF anything more than self-imposed. Self-imposed in active cooperation with prose product marketers who, being compelled to give everything a generic label, propelled us all into fundamental and self-fulfilling errors of perception. But self-imposed.

We kept hoping that the "Mainstream" would "recognize" the excellences we found in Theodore Sturgeon and Ray Bradbury, and "grant" our "genre" its "deserved status."* What did we get for that? Rod Serling.

It was Ellison, that feisty, unreasonable, prevaricating, megalomaniacal and revanchist monster, who had the insight and instinct to realize that seizure, not sweet reason, was the effective method. And he has done something else that no one else — regardless of talent or empathy — had ever been able to do from his position. He has created an entire school of writers who now routinely operate from the position that it's all one set of standards, and who are accepted as such by a growing number of people who wouldn't have been caught dead taking that sci-fi stuff seriously. There are even inklings that in some literary quarters, we are for the first time being permitted to not be invariably perfect, without getting the whole of SF damned as a consequence.

Not all of the stories in this book, for instance, are excellent. Some of

**It's amazing how tendentious you can make something sound by putting quotation marks around it, isn't it? Try it sometime on your own cherished beliefs; it's a "fun" game.*

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them verge on not being very good at all. So what? The *writer* is good; the good stories are good not only in themselves but as reflections of a good source.

Mind you — here's the other shoe — they are not what they are so often claimed to be; viz., expressions of a pitiless and deft realism which exposes the exact nature of the world. To believe they are is to disillusion yourself with them and with Ellison as you grow older and wiser. To believe that any writing, probably most especially fiction, can do any more than hint at reality is to believe there can be a perfect or even close representation of that which cannot be fully understood. Ellison is the foremost voice of the New Romanticism, in which the illusion is that (A) lies are evil per se and (B) to call something a lie is to speak the truth. But sourness and dark ain't nothin' but sweetness and light sproinnged out. Until we have writers who fully understand their own motives, the New Romanticism is not intrinsically more truthful than the old. Yet it is refreshing, at the very least, and like any other powerful literature, produces more good work by mistake than some forms do by diligent application.

I don't know how much diligent application went into *The Science Fictionary* — Ed Naha's attitude as reflected in the text seems to betray a lot of top-of-the-headedness — but it will serve as an example.

In its 380 text pages of rather large type relieved by photo reproductions and white space, this book purports to be "An A-Z Guide to the World of SF Authors, Films & TV Shows." There is an enormous amount of territory betwen the sorts of A and Z with which I'm familiar; I would have expected something three times the size of the Nicholls Encyclopedia, and then have been prepared to find shortfalls. But what Naha does cover often seems covered slapdash. So slapdash that one quickly gets the sense Naha really does think this is all there is, both to the facts and to the requirements of scholarship.

Most of his section on author biographies appears to have come from reading other published biographies, errors and all. If he made any attempt to contact his subjects and ask them for the data, I'm unaware of it. His references to currently prominent SF personalities are full of easily-obtained detail, while those to less well-known figures — Sam Merwin, Jr., for one example, Jerome Bixby for another, Daniel Keyes for a third, no mention of H. Beam Piper — are skeletal at best. Now and again, he adds a fresh error which could readily perpetuate itself, as when he consistently calls Fredric Brown "Frederic," or refers to Will Jenkins as William Fitzgerald. Some of the entries, as a matter of fact, read strikingly like point-for-point condensations of entries in the Nicholls, and that goes for the one that fails the

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Budrys test, too, since if you look under Budrys, Algis, you will get in effect a short version of the Nicholls, which perpetuates errors in Brian Ash's notorious *Who's Who in Science Fiction*, followed by a muddled summary of a couple of my books.

In other words, as far as at least one important aspect of this work goes, what you get is what anyone could get by taking a contemporary perspective off the top of his head, trotting out to a library, and filling in the details by lightly recasting whatever came up in the first source that fell to hand. This is not a reference book on science fiction. It's a fleshed-out schematic of what Ed Naha thought he knew about SF on the day he conceived this misbegotten book.

As far as his entries on TV and film go, there my expertise does not extend to a definite critique, but my suspicions do. Anyone who can produce a sentence that beings "Borrowing a page from the Bible, (Dr. Phibes) determines that each malefactor will be dispatched to his or her Valhalla...." is someone who doesn't listen to what he says. And the whole point of *Red Planet Mars* is that there aren't any Martians and they're *not* communicating with Peter Graves; it's not an SF film at all, though it's always foisted off as one.

Budrys test: *Who?*, whether as a novel or as a screenplay, turns on the fact that the man who might still be Martino spent time in the hands of Soviet spymaster Azarin. In the novel, I said Martino's emergency trip to a Soviet hospital wasn't planned by the Soviets. In the screenplay, there was a deliberately set-up car crash rather than an ambiguous lab accident. Naha's summary of the novel fails to make the central point; his summary of the screenplay fails to make the second.

My overall point is that it isn't the prominent stuff that we need fresh material on — as Naha demonstrates. It's the obscure and semi-obscure stuff that people require accurate references to — as Naha unintentionally demonstrates. Of course, that's the hard part to do.

For the part Naha did, Seaview Press wants $16.95. Don't do it. Put it in a bank account, and wait for the second edition of the Nicholls.

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A superior fantasy from Dorothy Gilbert, who once had a poem in F&SF and who has published poetry in The New Yorker, The Nation *and others and has had an sf story in Robert Silverberg's NEW DIMENSIONS anthology. Ms. Gilbert is a college English teacher who lives in northern California and writes that she is a volunteer worker at KPFA, the listener-sponsored radio station where Anthony Boucher was a luminary for so many years.*

A Winter Flowering

BY

DOROTHY GILBERT

He was a large, fair-haired, energetic-looking man who stood out easily in the small airport terminal, and the college driver, sent to pick up this visitor and prepared with a description, singled out Dr. Alan Flaxman at once. What Bonnier, the driver, saw was a man perhaps a head taller than anyone else there; apparently in his forties; not athletic or trim, but with such a ruddy, blond complexion and vigorous manner that he seemed in ostentatious good health. His hair and beard, while still short enough to be neat, were long and thick enough, and pale enough, to be noticeable in any group; and there was the slight suggestion that the professor rather fancied their elegant effect. He was not stylishly dressed — in fact, he looked a bit like an unmade bed — but he seemed a definitive personality, big, forceful, energetic. He had an odd, rolling gait, the driver noticed — like a seaman? — a cowboy? — someone who had had some physical disability as a child? — and this also made him a distinctive figure in that crowd of travelers.

"Dr. Flaxman?" said the driver, and introduced himself.

"Ah, yes! Good to meet you!" said this cheery individual, glowing like a fired-up old-fashioned stove. Out in the parking lot, in snow falling in thick wet flakes and already covering the older drifts, the driver tried to lift the professor's big black suitcase, which was oddly heavy. "Here, no, I'll take that!" Flaxman said cheerfully, and threw it in the back of the station wagon. He did it as gracefully as an athlete. A small, worn, very ordinary briefcase he kept with him. The two men started out into the snowy night, on the twenty-mile drive to the college.

The night whirled about them in

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great nebular blasts, and the driver was glad he knew this road well and had driven it in ice and snow many times. "Are you comfortable?" he said to his passenger. "I guess you don't see much of this kind of weather. Didn't you come in from Los Angeles? Do you live there?"

"Near Los Angeles," said the professor in his deep, warming voice. "If you can just fix that draft on my knees — Oh, you can't fix it? Don't worry about it, then. Your car drives nicely, doesn't it? How often do you get to drive in a storm like this?"

Five miles down the road — slick, and far more hazardous than the driver would have admitted — Flaxman had this northeasterner talking about the winters he had known in rural Quebec as a boy; about the Vermont winters he knew here as a man; how they were similar, how different; how one got used to them; how they were always taking you unawares; how you could feel a snowstorm coming on, and smell it; how often, as in this storm, you got caught. Once, when the snow came at them in a great white maelstrom, they had to pull off the road and stop for five minutes; several times they rounded a steep bend at five miles an hour, praying that they would not slide off the edge. Bonnier did not tell Flaxman how precipitous the road in fact was. At last the white blasts began to diminish and lights began to show in the dark below them and to their right. Then they drew up at the motel, parking in the harsh pink and orange light from the neon sign over the office.

It seemed to the driver, watching Flaxman as they walked up the unshoveled sidewalk and into the office, that the professor's appearance was noticeably different from that he had thought he had observed nearly an hour before. The complexion was not fresh and ruddy; it was almost grey. It looked like cement block, in texture, and almost in color. The visitor looked exhausted and ill. Funny, he had seemed such a stalwart type. Well, it had been a frightening drive; after all, the man was from California and he had just flown all the way across the United States. And this light was bad. Maybe some of my first impressions were wrong, thought the driver.

"Were you ever in the Navy?" he said, watching with concern while the drawn-looking visitor carried his own heavy suitcase. "You have a sailor's walk."

Flaxman laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "Everyone asks me that. Or they think, if they know that I grew up in Arizona, that I was a cowpuncher. No, it's just my eccentricity," and he laughed again, still the warming, comfortable laugh that the other man had noticed all along.

Bonnier had a note and some instructions for Flaxman, which he delivered to the professor. Then, his task was finished, but he hesitated; the traveler looked so peculiar. The driver could risk making himself a nuisance

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to his companion, or risk abandoning a man in bad health and possible physical danger; he chose the former.

"I'll help you to your room," said the driver. "Don't you want me to carry that thing?" He reached for the big black suitcase, determined to carry it this time; again he could barely lift it. Flaxman picked up the bag. Bonnier walked along the hall with him, feeling wretched and inept.

In the room the professor flung the suitcase on the bed. He turned to Bonnier and shook his hand. "I'm grateful to you," he said.

It was a dismissal, plainly; but the tall white-haired man was looking more ill by the minute, and the driver really did not want to leave him. "Can't I do anything?" he asked anxiously. Flaxman did not respond; he went to the suitcase and opened it and began taking out some of the contents. It was the queerest array of pipes, tubes, grommets, flasks (carefully wrapped) and containers of odd-colored powders the driver had ever seen or imagined. It made him think, vaguely, of a miniature distillery. Then Flaxman took from his briefcase what appeared to be a lamp and attached it to the mechanism he had just assembled. All these tasks were done with the air of a man who wishes very much to be in private but is in such an extremity of discomfort that he ignores any spectators. Flaxman turned on the lamp; it had a greenish amber light, wonderfully warm, like the glow of brandy or chartreuse. The professor held the lamp up against his face and neck and against his chest.

"I will be all right," he said to his companion. "Thanks again for bringing me here."

"Okay, if you're sure," said the driver. "But let someone know if you need anything, all right? Here at the motel, or at the college...."

"Don't worry," said Flaxman. The lamplight made his thick hair look dark greenish gold, and the greyness had gone from his face. "Goodbye, and take care."

The driver left. Alone in the room, Flaxman sat with his lamp, warming himself. After a few moments, he hung up his clothes and lay down to rest. He left the lamp attached to the other apparatus, though he was no longer using it; he was evidently making sure the lamp was charged. He lay with his eyes closed for a few moments, and then he propped himself up on the great puffy pillows of the motel bed and perused the material the driver had given him.

Flaxman had been invited to this small town in Vermont because he was being interviewed for a job. The college, which had little money and little opportunity to offer a position to a new teacher, was finally desperate; in fact, the faculty were looking for one Professor of English to cover the work of two or three. One of the English Department's most productive members

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was retiring; another was ill; still another was entitled to a sabbatical, which she had generously put off for a year in order to accommodate her colleagues. Thus, the department was now looking for just the right combination of disciplines and talents to serve this compound emergency. The new professor must be trained in Medieval and Renaissance literature, skilled at teaching freshman composition, able to handle a remedial writing course or two, and should have extensive experience in both linguistics and theater. If the candidate could teach English as a second language, and prepare students to teach it, so much the better. The candidate must naturally have a Ph.D. and numerous publications, as well as evidence of outstanding teaching ability.

All these accomplishments Professor Alan Flaxman appeared to have in abundance, and his dossier was almost irritatingly full of achievements, distinctions, praises, and enthusiastic recommendations. "A lambent personality," said one of the letters in his file; "a capacious and generous mind," said another; still another, "a large man, authoritative yet informal in manner, inspiring confidence in students, yet intellectually rigorous and demanding." Flaxman's scholarly performance, too, was vigorous and enviable; particularly fresh and luminous were his observations on Provençal poetry and on the Goliard poets and their influence on English literature. The members of the hiring committee of the English Department were exhausted by the endless applications for this job, by all the deliberations and the agonizing selections and exclusions, as well as by their usual teaching obligations. They were also worn down by the usual rigors of the New England winter and the various influenzas, catarrhs, colds, grippes, shakes and fevers that accompanied the season like attendant evil spirits. They looked at Flaxman's outstanding file and they hoped — fervently hoped — that he might appear and somehow immediately reveal himself as Mr. Right, as the obvious, unassailable choice for the job. Then they could turn, blameless and satisfied, to the other demands of their lives: committee meetings, late into the evenings, in drafty rooms; course preparations; stacks of student papers to be labored over as they, the evaluators, shivered and coughed and stretched their nerves painfuly with caffein, late into the nights and early mornings.

The note Flaxman had been given included a welcome from the chairman of the hiring committee; a schedule of the interviews, social gatherings, and other events Flaxman would encounter; and a map of the campus. Also — as Flaxman had been led to expect — the chairman himself, Roger Harcourt, would be telephoning Flaxman in half an hour or so to make arrangements for dinner.

Harcourt called on schedule. He

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was a soft-spoken person with a pronounced New England accent; Flaxman thought for a second he was getting a call from someone named Hackett. Had Flaxman gotten there all right? He had not been too unsettled by the wild ride? His room was all right? If it suited Flaxman, Harcourt would be over in ten minutes, and then they would go over to dinner at The Antlers, the one real restaurant of the town, where two other members of the department would be joining them. It was a very short drive, not a wild one like that Flaxman had just experienced on his way from the airport.

The Antlers was a large, dark, barn-like restaurant five minutes' drive down the main road outside the small town. Harcourt's two colleagues, both youngish and earnest-looking, were sorting through a large stack of file cards spread out on the white tablecloth when the candidate and the chairman came in. One of them, a man, swept the cards into a briefcase and stood up, as if at attention. His woman companion stood up, too, but gracefully, as if glad of the chance. Flaxman was formally introduced to these two, whose names were John and Lucia Bowman, and, rather formally, they all sat down. Flaxman placed his briefcase beside Bowman's, on an extra chair next to him.

After the initial stiffness, it was a convivial meal. Harcourt and the Bowmans immediately liked Flaxman. His vigor had returned and they, too, noticed his ruddiness, his cheeriness, his ability to be both relaxed and attentive, even after such a demanding journey. His sense of their situation, his human curiosity, were noticeable, so much so, in fact, that he seemed at times to be subtly interviewing *them*, like a suave but eager reporter. How long had they been here? What scholarly projects were they engaged in? Did they find the library adequate for teaching, and more specialized materials for research easy to obtain? Had Lucia, a specialist in Romantic Literature, read Jonas's new book on Shelley's vision of Science? He proceeded, with modesty and enthusiasm, to astonish her by his detailed and passionate reactions to it, all expressed with an air of particularly wanting her reaction to his ideas. What did they think of the Fourmier concept of teaching composition? Was it, in their opinion, too rigorous, too soon, or did it inspire students with a feeling of practical, serious responsibility, a sense of themselves as adult thinkers? Did they, personally, enjoy the New England climate, with its *real* winter and other glorious (if shorter) seasons? Were they accustomed to this climate when they came, or had they had to acclimate themselves to it? Were their homes warm? Did they like oil heating? Did they ski? Did their kids enjoy this life? With all his eagerness and apparent candor, Flaxman himself seemed skillfully secretive about a number of things they were burning to know.

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They wanted to know, though it was not proper to ask, whether he had ever been married; whether he would be bringing anyone with him if he came here to live; if he had any offspring, in his household or anywhere else. All they seemed able to find out with any certainty was that he was formidably capable and energetic, jolly as a hot toddy, and professional as a new snowplow brought out after a blizzard. He had lived in California for six years, in New Orleans before that, and he had spent some time in Minnesota, so he knew he could take a Northern climate, once he was used to it again. He had been born in a small town, a desert town, somewhere near Flagstaff, but not all that near. It was near a missile-testing base, but again, not as near as all that. "It's near jackrabbits, sagebrush, and mesas," Flaxman said in his disarming way, "*That's* what it's near!"

More and more, as they talked to him, as they felt cheered and warmed by him, they began to wish that all would be as it seemed and that they could hire him. They hoped that their colleagues, with their assorted sensitivities and proclivities, would be as convinced as they themselves were, and they developed, as they sat there, a common desire to groom Flaxman a bit and to warn him of any dangers in the negotiations ahead. Some of their associates would cross-examine him on his scholarship; others on his genuine understanding of disadvantaged students; certain individuals would interpret a strength in one direction as a weakness in another. One or two would try to find fault with his age and argue for a younger candidate; he must project to these people his notable energy and ebullience, as well as his sagacity. One or two — Gerda Freer in particular, there was always Gerda Freer! — would be startlingly direct in their questioning, and he must not be thrown off balance if she was to ask him, point-blank, what sort of family life he had, or what his personal commitments were, and why, exactly, a small college in Vermont, in this day and age, should hire an expert on dead languages who was already forty-seven years of age. He would enjoy meeting President Calissi, a Florentine and a biologist, who was much cherished by everyone. He would like Dean Francis Forth. He would like very much Dean Laura Silvia, who was so chic and shrewd and debonair, and whose merry beauty so delighted everyone with any talents of observation.

An odd conceit occured to Harcourt, as he sat enjoying this particular professional duty. How interesting it was, he thought to himself, that people's names described them so well. You were unlikely to find in a book, in this century at least, a poet's girlfriend named Musa, or a great pompous fake of a man named Bull, or a farmer-mayor named Ruddy Ham; writers, at least realistic writers, had lost their nerve in that respect. But one found such people in real life. Here sat this

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candidate, a big man with the most beautiful head of tow Harcourt had ever seen, named Flaxman; it was peculiar, like a portent in a dream. It reminded him a bit of Laura Silvia. She too had beautiful white, or near-white hair; it was ridiculous, but there really was something silvery about her, something about light flashing and changing, she scintillated. Maybe there was some kind of conspiracy among the flaxen and well-named. Maybe they somehow got to name themselves, knowing as preposterously prescient children what they would be like, or what was appropriate. It would be nice if there were numbers of these people; Laura and Alan were both so delightful and able.

Harcourt took leave of Flaxman at the motel door. Harsh orange light fell on their faces; the snow, falling more slowly again in big flakes, landed on their heavy overcoats. It seemed to Harcourt that in the subfreezing winter air, suddenly, Flaxman's face had a noticeably drawn look, as if the cold gave his facial muscles a kind of paralysis. It was greyish, too, like pumice or some porous stone.

He clapped the candidate on the arm. "Good luck tomorrow," he said. "Get a good night's sleep. I'll be by for you at quarter to nine."

The next day Flaxman was to have the day-long set of interviews usual for job-seeking people of his profession. At nine o'clock, after a hasty breakfast, he met Francis Forth, the Dean of Academic Affairs. Forth talked briefly to the large, ebullient candidate, who was so full of questions and enthusiasm; he liked Flaxman very much. The English Department would do well to get this man, if appearances meant anything. The fellow had a sanity about him, a kindling sense of humor, he seemed so clear and observant.

Then there was coffee with seven or eight people, coming and going, in a lounge outside Roger Harcourt's office. Some were outsiders, spectators and admirers of the practice of teaching literature. Old George Fortescue, who had been Professor of Violin at this college before he retired and who described himself as "just a musician," was there; also Nina Fell, John Fell's physicist wife. Gerda Freer was there; she was a vigorous plump woman in a burgundy pantsuit, and seemed as good as her billing. "Do you have a family in California?" she said point-blank over her coffee cup, in her deep voice, as if to get the examination over. "Will you be coming with anyone?"

"As far as I know, I'll be coming alone," Flaxman said amiably.

"Gerda, you're cross-examining him" said Harcourt. "I don't think we need to have an inquisition here."

"Well, I think we should be a little informed about our candidate. It *has* been a problem in the past, after all, when we got inappropriate people. We had that poet who took his students

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hang-gliding and freight-hopping and who had them making God knows *what* chemical potations in his cellar. And there was Tony Carp, of course, who was going to stay here forever and left after a year because his wife wanted to teach oceanography in San Diego."

"Well, Alan, was it eight children you said you have?" said John Bowman. He winked at the candidate. "Didn't you tell me you all go hang-gliding together? Or was it scuba-diving?"

There was a minute of silence. Gerda's lip actually twitched. She was quiet and the others went on talking. The conversation turned to many things, in bits and snatches. They discussed weather, and Vermont politics and academia, and health coverage (this was, Flaxman should know, a very good community in which to be sick, if one had to be sick, because the hospitals were excellent and the college policies admirable). They talked about teaching methods; about what students read most sensitively; about what students overlook in what they read; about current fiction and poetry, and its assumptions, demands, and illuminations. Had Flaxman read Schonhauf's new novel? Was he impressed by its attitudes toward human labor, toward human passion, and by Schonhauf's execution of those ideas?

"I don't know," said old Mr. Fortescue, in his beautiful Shakespearean-actor's voice. "All this ego. All this strutting. All this rutting. I understand it, but I'm tired of it. I'm just so tired of it."

"Hear, hear," said Roger Harcourt, in his New England accent.

"What really gets to me at the moment," said Gerda, venturing forth from her place of ostracized silence and spilling cigarette ash on her jacket, "is how, in so many current novels, the test of man's deep devotion to the woman is that he gets an erection every time he looks at her, even if it's in the airport or on line at the supermarket. 'Look what you've done to me, baby.' 'This is what you do for me, baby.' It's so *dumb*. When's the fashion going to change?"

There was, again, a hostile and subfreezing silence. Then Lucia Bowman laughed; John Bowman said, as if from a great height, "Well, but what sort of novels are you talking about, Gerda?"

"I'm talking about Schonhauf. Don't you remember?"

"Well, *you* obviously do," said Bowman, obviously sure that he had scored himself a little victory and very pleased with himself.

"I never claimed *not* to!" said poor Gerda, looking around her at the disapproving faces. "Of what are you accusing me, John?"

Flaxman turned, very quickly, toward Gerda. "I agree with you," he said in a voice like sunshine. "I agree absolutely with what you say. No doubt I'm still back in the sixteenth

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century, or the fourteenth. People were people then, too; they were candid about their desires, but I must say I like a view of life like that in Shakespeare's sonnets, in Sidney's sonnets. Why not have your passion with a little elegance? With a little illusion, for that matter?"

"Heah, heah," said Roger Harcourt.

"I understand," said Peter Chen, the expert on techniques of literary criticism, "that you are a fine Renaissance musician and that you sing for your students and give concerts."

"Yes," said Flaxman. "I've done that. I gave a concert last year and the year before. I can play the lute, and also the theorbo and the virginals, but I have a friend who usually accompanies me. Or we get some people from the orchestra who know old instruments."

"My heavens!" said Harcourt, exchanging delighted looks with George Fortescue. "It's too bad that we didn't organize a concert!"

"Well, I can give you an example," said Flaxman, with dignity.

There was consternation at first, because they really did not want this princely candidate to make a faux pas. But Flaxman began to sing. He had a wonderful voice, hard to classify: baritone? tenor? — the high notes were golden, but there was something dark about them, a cello quality. His voice seemed a natural emanation of his big, easy body, like his personality, like his health and coloring. The song was a John Dowland air, familiar to many of them.

I saw my lady weep,
And Sorrow proud to be advanced so
In those fair eyes where all perfections keep.
Her face was full of woe;
But such a woe, believe me, that wins more hearts
Than Mirth can do with all her enticing parts.

He sang two verses; his voice had a resonance almost as if the lute were reverberating in the background. For those who knew the song, it seemed that way, then and in their memories. His voice was like levels of warm stone, brown and gold, or like the wood of a lute in a Renaissance painting, or like aspen leaves, yellow and deep red-gold, spinning and shimmering like coins above the snow in the Vermont woods. When he finished, there was not a sound in the room. There was only the sound of the wind in the bare branches outside, of the wind howling around the corner of the building, a bitter animus, hating the beauty and warmth and pleasure generated and shared by the people inside.

"Will you do another one?" said Lucia timidly, laughing a little.

He gave them the Rosseter air that goes:

What then is love but mourning,
What desire, but a self-burning?

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* * *

and that goes on to say that beauty is but a blooming, that summer to winter fadeth, and that time will undo us all. He sang this song with great aplomb, and then he did another.

Before this love, this singing flame,
in gold consumed my deadening
frame;
Before this burning dance, that
makes
blossom that from my body breaks;
Before this love, I was like stone,
or tree from which the life has gone.

"What's *that*?" said Harcourt, who was of course, as chairman of the hiring committee, knowledgeable about Renaissance literature. "It's totally unfamiliar to me."

"It's a translation," said Flaxman. "It's from the Arabic. I don't know that much thirteenth-century Arabic, but there are Spanish translations, contemporary and later, and I could, by comparing them, make good guesses. I think this kind of thing had more influence on English literature than people suspect."

"I know about the *ghazal*," said Harcourt, "and the Hispano-Arabic *kharjahs*, or — you know — refrains."

"This is more related to a *zajal*," said Flaxman. "I think there's no question that these poems influenced the troubadours and poets in most Romance languages. And subsequently the poets in our own language."

"Where did you find the music?" asked old George Fortescue.

"Well, I invented it," said Flaxman with a smile.

At that point Flaxman had to go meet President Calissi, if only for a few minutes. Then there was to be lunch at the Faculty Club, with Harcourt and with Laura Silvia, Dean of Students.

It was a clear, very cold morning, well below zero. Harcourt walked Flaxman over to the Administration Building, a stately century-old edifice of grey stone; waited while the president, a handsome old Italian, exchanged a few words with the candidate and was as charmed by him as everyone else had been, evidently; and then escorted him over to the Faculty Club. They were nearly there, and Harcourt was walking briskly; Flaxman seemed more silent than usual. Harcourt looked at him; Flaxman's face was drawn and set. "Like a face of cement," Harcourt thought this time; the candidate's face seemed to become rapidly greyer as Harcourt looked at it. And then Flaxman fell — collapsed — into the snow.

Roger Harcourt grabbed him. "Can you walk if I support you?" he said, placing his arm under the candidate's back. "Do you think you can walk?"

"Yes, yes," said Flaxman. "If we can just get inside..."

It was a struggle, because Harcourt was not of so substantial a build as his

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guest, but the emergency strengthened him. Inside, in the lounge, Flaxman lay against a couch, gasping and shuddering. Few people had assembled for lunch — they were, as it happened, early — and except for two men who gave them an odd glance as Flaxman started to sit up and look normal, no one seemed to notice that anything had gone wrong. Flaxman revived quickly. Within four or five minutes his color was better, though pale.

"It's that I'm not used to the climate," the big white-haired man said. "If I were to acclimate myself slowly — if I lived here — it wouldn't be a problem. I'd get used to it. You mustn't worry."

"Have you had this problem diagnosed? Are you getting medical attention for it?"

"Oh, yes. It's a vascular problem. It can be controlled. By the way, I wonder if you could get me a glass of water? I do need to take my medication."

Harcourt obliged. Flaxman put two capsules into the water, which immediately turned a deep cobalt blue. Flaxman sipped the potion, two small swallows at a time. After two or three minutes, his color changed a bit more, brightening and clearly noticeably, and he tossed off the rest of the blue fluid. "I'm better now," he said, "but I will absent myself for a moment. Down the hall and to ... the right?"

"Yes," said Harcourt, wondering at Flaxman's power of observation. "Shall I go with you?"

"No, I'll be all right," said Flaxman, and went off, carrying his briefcase.

"I'm so sorry to alarm you like this," the candidate said when he returned. "You mustn't worry. As I say, I just have to get used to the climate."

"Don't you think we should have a doctor check you out? Let me take you to the infirmary. I'd feel so much better about it if someone saw you. I'll explain to Laura."

"No, no, please. I'm all right, I promise you. I know, from living with this condition."

"We could go to the infirmary right after lunch, if you prefer. Please, let's do that. You'll relieve my mind a great deal if we go."

"No, no," said Flaxman, and there was urgency, almost irritation, in his voice. "I won't hear of it. I'm fine now, and I'd be most upset if you changed the schedule in any way. Please, let's forget about it."

He did seem absolutely and vigorously well, sitting up and leaning forward as if full of nervous energy.

And then Laura arrived. "So sorry I'm late," she said. "It's been one of those mornings!" She tossed her head a little to one side, swinging her white hair, and smiled as if everyone knew what "those mornings" were. Harcourt introduced the two.

Laura Silvia seemed about forty. She was one of those people who go through life being noticeably beautiful, and thus seem set apart, obviously spe-

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cial, obviously definitive. It was easy to visualize this woman at the age of six, or sixteen, or twenty-five, or eighty; you looked at her and saw her type of beauty, in the past and in the future. You also saw how it is that personal beauty changes those around it, igniting something in them, making them more alive. Laura's hair, probably once ash-blonde, was now white and cut in a neat bob; it was lovely hair, thick and strong and straight. She had color and vigor, and looked like someone you might see hiking on the trails in the Green Mountains, or on the ski slopes. She wore now — as she commonly did — grey and green clothes, and some silver jewelry; she seemed to suggest light moving over silver, or over water, or leaves shining in a forest. She was slightly odd-looking, of course, with her snowy head and her generally youthful appearance.

"Alan is from Arizona, originally," said Roger Harcourt. "You were out there last summer, weren't you, Laura?"

Laura smiled at the candidate; it was a teasing, a leading smile. "Yes," she said. "I was near New Vista." She looked Flaxman straight in the eyes and smiled again.

"New Vista, did you say?" said Alan Flaxman. What particularly good coloring the man had when he was well; was he *blushing?*

"Yes," Laura said, one corner of her mouth turned humorously downward. "New Vista. New Vista has such beautiful red rocks...."

"Do you mean the New Vista near New Landing?"

"Yes. Near New Landing the rocks are more hazardous. But they are still red and still beautiful."

"I agree with you," said Flaxman, glowing. "The red rocks are beautiful, but the brown rocks are glorious."

"And the orange rocks," said Laura, radiantly, "are celestial."

"Yes," said Alan Flaxman in a careful, portentous voice. "Celestial."

Dear God, thought Harcourt, what's the matter with these two? Have they developed a teen-age crush on each other in the last five minutes? Flaxman probably still doesn't feel well; he's probably a lot more sick than he'll admit, and I wish he'd be reasonable about the infirmary, but what's come over Laura?

"When were you last in New Vista?" said Laura, gently, delusively.

Flaxman looked nervously at Harcourt. "Why, I was there last June, as a matter of fact," he said to her. "We must just have missed each other."

"How regrettable," she said. "Perhaps another time. Had they begun collecting dried desert primroses?"

"No," he said in a voice full of concern. "No, they were still blooming."

"All of them?"

Well, really, thought Harcourt.

"No. No, actually some of them were dried out and made good botanical specimens."

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"Ah! Well, that's the way it goes," said Laura, in that bright voice one uses at a party, when one is determined to make a lame and boring conversation sound breezy and witty. "Poor Roger — we southwesterners are such an oblivious lot. When we run into people from our own turf, we get so absorbed in each other. I didn't mean to tangle with Alan about dried primroses, for God's sake, while you sat here in desperation. Whom have you talked to today, Alan? How do you like this place?"

There followed a rather more lively conversation on more relevant topics; then, after lunch, there was a coffee hour where members of the department and students, could meet and talk with Flaxman, and then he was to give his lecture.

When the coffee hour was over, a large talkative group walked down the hall with Harcourt and Flaxman, arguing about *Dr. Faustus*, noncredit courses, and various other subjects. Harcourt, looking around to make a point to the candidate, suddenly noticed that the tall, white-haired man had disappeared. Stiff with alarm, he detached himself from the group and went back along the hall. How had Flaxman, so conspicuous a figure, managed to disengage himself? If he was really ill, wouldn't it have been more noticeable? Harcourt looked hastily back into the lounge where they had all been chatting a few minutes before; no one there. He looked up and down the hall. Then, from a small seminar room, he heard Laura's voice, and then Flaxman's. Well, she was looking after the situation; it would be all right, but he would see what was happening. He hurried up the hall. Then he stopped again.

It was the quality of the voices that stopped him, before he actually heard what was being said. At first he heard Flaxman's voice, low and inarticulate. Then Laura was speaking, and her voice was urgent, exhortative, in a way that he had never, at the most significant professional gatherings, heard before. In fact, in its emotion it seemed almost to have an accent, to be a foreigner's voice, though still a familiar one.

"You must not speak the branching language," he heard her say. "And you know we must not consider any of this. Alan, you know what the consequences will be. Don't you realize that the training, the years of self-discipline we went through before we came here, were meant to prepare us for just such an event as this? Think of how many others must have been tempted as we are. All of us, in our many assignments and activities, have been able to control ourselves. This is not a time for indulgence. You must not set on, you must not! If you do, the process will be under way, and we will both be helpless. Do you want to be the one, of all of us, who gives way?"

"Yes, that is what I want," said Alan Flaxman. "That is what we both

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want, Laura, and you know it."

What in God's name, thought Harcourt. He stood outside the heavy beechwood door, drawn, without being conscious of himself, into the position of listener at the crack or the keyhole. Do they know each other? he wondered. Why haven't they said so? What are they engaged in, is there some sort of plot to get him to come here? Why? Who is involved? What on earth is going on? He stood utterly still, straining to distinguish their words.

Alan Flaxman continued, in a voice Harcourt could hardly hear. "It can't be helped, Laura. It is what we are. Sooner or later it is going to happen, somewhere, among some of us. And if it is to others, you and I will have denied ourselves, to no purpose. We will have strangled the new life that is growing between us. Why are you so denying, so relentless?"

Laura spoke again in her reasoning, slightly accented voice. "I see," she said, "that I must do the thinking for both of us. Would you destroy The Infiltration? All that we have worked for, and hoped for, and struggled for as a people; all that we believe in; would you, for the two of us, blast that in an instant?"

"Damn The Infiltration!" Alan Flaxman cried out, and Harcourt heard Laura gasp. "Laura, are we to become *things* in the service of an idea? Things in the service of a rigid principle? The Infiltration is here; it has happened already. Even now, they will have to accept it here, and submit to it. You know that. Remember: 'Thwart Nature, and starve Fate.' Surely —"

"It's three o'clock!" Laura cried out. "Your lecture!"

"Roger Harcourt will be looking for me," said Alan Flaxman. "He'll think I've had another cold-rigor attack."

"Let him think just that. There, you look quite presentable; do I? Let's go, fast!"

Harcourt had been alert enough to back off quickly and noiselessly, duck around a corner, and then walk down the hall toward the door again as if he had heard nothing. The door opened. "Ah, there you are," Laura said to Harcourt, her voice almost normal. "Alan wanted to sit down and rest for a few minutes before he gave his talk. You were involved with John and those other people, so I just spirited Alan away. He says he's ready."

"Fine, fine," said Harcourt, nervously, heartily. "You've got everything you need?" and he glanced perfunctorily at Flaxman, who was carrying his briefcase and looked in every way ready to perform.

The small room was crowded; word had gotten around fast. There were something like a dozen students, most of the English Department, George Fortescue, and several members of the Department of French and Italian, already seated and waiting. "Do you suppose," said a rather snobbish-looking male undergraduate,

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"that he's going to *sing*?"

"I hope so," Bowman said emphatically. The student stared.

Flaxman began his talk. Initially he seemed a bit strained and shy; then he seemed to work into a style that was, while suitably formal, relaxed and disarming. Petrarchan idealism was his subject; idealized love. What validity has it in our psychology? Are we inheritors of it, still, in this day and age, or is it a residue from a vanished mode of existence? It was a beautifully organized lecture, the members of the English Department thought, nodding to each other and to their colleagues in the Department of French and Italian. Excellent, refreshing, well developed. Flaxman's manner was a bit distant, surprisingly, but still there was a kind of intensity about him; he had such a fine speaking voice, and that gave his speech a special kind of emotional power.

Roger Harcourt, sitting in the front row with his colleagues, was minimally aware of Flaxman's lecture. He could watch the candidate as he talked, but he was too distraught to follow the man's argument closely, and was grateful that the subject matter was as familiar to him as it was. What was he to do? Who were Laura and Alan? No explanation — no sane one, anyway — seemed plausible. Were they spies for some Communist country? Were they playing a joke? Were they previously acquainted, or weren't they? Had they, unaccountably, fallen instantly in love, and were they now playing some sort of silly lovers' game? Were they both insane, and inhabiting the same illusion? It was impossible to assess what was happening. Somehow he must be patient; somehow he must get to the bottom of it all and be equal to the situation. But how could he? By confronting Laura? By taking one of his associates into his confidence? Which one? What would he say? Anything he could think of saying would sound like nonsense and gibberish.

He realized that Laura, sitting just behind him, had always been an anomaly to him and that he had never really understood his feelings toward her. Without fully realizing it, he had not allowed himself to think about her very much, since she was so attractive, and he himself was married and settled. In fact, he had been afraid of her beauty, would have been so if he had still been a bachelor. Suddenly he felt sad; he knew that he had not allowed himself to notice Laura and had permitted himself no possibilities regarding her. He knew vaguely, as everyone there did, that she had lived in New Mexico and Arizona; been educated in the Northwest; never, as far as he knew, been married; seemed to have none of the discontents and complaints he himself expected of single people. She seemed, in fact, thoroughly happy, thoroughly competent, and thoroughly wrapped up in her life at the college. This instant love affair, or whatever it was, seemed totally out of

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character. But he knew almost nothing — nothing really personal — about her, nor did any of his close associates, to his knowledge.

Who is Laura Silvia? he thought. What is she? And who is Alan Flaxman?

"We can never know, of course," Flaxman was saying, "how influenced we are by the ideas in our past."

Whose past? Where were these people from, and what were they up to?

Somehow it seemed most likely, Roger Harcourt decided, that this was an elaborate fantasy-game played by two powerfully attracted people. But it was all most peculiar.

The lecture ended, amid much applause. A question or two was asked by some member of that attentive audience and graciously answered by Flaxman. Then Gerda stood up.

"A special request," she said in her throaty voice. "Will you sing for us? The songs you gave us this morning?"

Flaxman paused and looked deeply embarrassed. "No, no," he said. "I'd rather not. Thank you, I appreciate it, I'm flattered, but no."

"Oh, no, no, do sing!" They all begged him; not only Gerda, but George Fortescue, and the Bowmans, and the students joined in, delighted with the novelty and full of curiosity. "You have a claque, Alan," said Roger Harcourt. "You'd better oblige."

"I see I must," said Flaxman. He gave them the Dowland air and then the Rosseter; then, after much clamor, he gave them the translation from the Arabic that he had set himself.

"Well, I'm overwhelmed," he said in a shaky voice amid all the applause. The music had subsided; the brightness, the tones almost of a lute, fell from the air, vanished. Suddenly the world was a darker place. It was late afternoon; the sun was sinking behind the snowy rises of the meadows, and the sky and the earth, and the reflected light in the windows, suggested fading brilliance, rosiness turning to ashy colors. Flaxman himself seemed set and withdrawn, as if he felt he had gone too far, displayed himself too much.

"That was fine, that was really fine," said Roger Harcourt, coming up to the candidate and clapping him on the shoulder. "I can see you're exhausted. Let's go up to the lounge outside my office and relax for a bit. Just relax and chat. Come on."

But they were followed by the Bowmans, and Laura Silvia, and George Fortescue, and Gerda Freer.

Like a procession, they walked up the stairs to the second floor. They passed a window that offered the same view that Harcourt had from his office and that he particularly liked. It was of a very large, very old beech tree, now covered with snow; but, as always, it had an urn-like, or lyre-like, shape and quality. Harcourt was in the habit of looking out at it as he worked, as he talked to people, as he puzzled things out at his desk. The tree changed dur-

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ing the seasons, but always it seemed full of plenty and light and promise. Now, though it had snow on all its branches in abundance, it held the view of the winter hills beyond it, like some kind of voiceless music. The snow lined it with light and made it look as if it were in flower, though the wind brushed drifts off it and whirled about it, making dervish-like figures in the air. Laura walked by the window, a bit hastily; Flaxman, who had been walking with her, lagged behind for a moment and looked out. It was a long look, as if the light moved him, and Harcourt felt a small, odd gratification at the idea that Flaxman, even with his physical difficulties, shared his enjoyment of this sight. Then Flaxman caught up with Laura.

"The cause," Harcourt heard her say, in a very low voice. "The Infiltration!"

"No; our own!" Flaxman said in an equally inaudible voice. Laura walked slightly ahead of him, toward Harcourt's office, and the others followed.

Coffee was brought, bracing and soothing; they sat in the big rumpled office, talking about Vermont and Arizona and California. The big rumpled tow-headed man, Harcourt thought, had his usual warmth; his fatigue almost showed itself to his advantage, because he relaxed to accommodate it, and his manner was, more than ever, appropriately informal, though not too much so. Flaxman had a kind of natural dignity, observed Harcourt; it was this sort of man who could dress as Flaxman did, and sing at academic gatherings. He was cordial and yet he could always contrive to maintain a distance, a sense of privacy. It was a social talent; Harcourt had not seen it expressed in just that way before. But what personal secrets did Flaxman carry about with him? What sort of life did he live?

The Bowmans were talking with their usual argumentative energy; Laura Silvia was listening and smiling her droll smile. The others were the audience, for the time being. It was a convivial group. Only Flaxman seemed to Harcourt to be disturbed — sad? — as if trying to make terms with some private melancholy. How hard it was to be a job candidate, no matter how excellent and qualified, under any circumstances. Roger Harcourt was glad those days were over for him, all those days of professional uncertainty, anxiety, job-seeking, obtaining tenure. He doubted that he could go through it again, and he was ten years younger than Alan Flaxman. But what a comfortable group of colleagues this was, with Flaxman here, with Flaxman in any mood, even with Gerda present! How animated Laura was! How she laughed! It was clear that she and Flaxman were drawn to each other; now it seemed as if she could not help looking at him, turning her head for little glances, and the manner of avoidance Harcourt had sensed in her as they

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were walking toward this room was gone. Whenever she did look at Flaxman, as if safely doing so in a group, he immediately responded in kind, as if expecting her glance.

"We must have you give a public concert here," John Bowman was saying to the candidate.

"Yes," said George Fortescue, "perhaps early in the fall."

"More coffee, anyone?" said Lucia Bowman. "Alan, just a spot more?"

But Alan Flaxman did not respond. He turned, suddenly, to Laura; he gave her a long, intent look. Then Harcourt heard him say, in the same shaky, agonized voice he had used when he spoke to her alone in the seminar room, "It is too late, Laura. It has begun. There is no help for it."

"Then," said Laura Silvia, "it is to be now." She smiled. Harcourt thought, with a pain at his heart, that it was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

None of the others could ever describe what happened just then; it happened too fast, it was too far outside their psychological and visual expectations. Perhaps they were not looking at precisely the spot where it occurred. Harcourt, watching the last dull red rays of the sun on the cold blue fields outside, heard an enormous *hrrriiiiiippppppp!* like the opening of a parachute; it was a long, silken, exploding noise, and he looked up at something it took him several seconds to comprehend.

There, covering the entire wall of the lounge, opposite the window, was what appeared to be a tree — no, two trees — espaliered in a spreading lyre-like design. There were two trunks, of a rough, metallic-looking, greyish-blue bark; and there were branches, of an iridescent grey color merging to blue or purple-brown or green, that stretched and forked along the wall. As the two forms grew they seemed in pursuit of each other. At the ends of twigs small fronds appeared, and unrolled like ferns, changing from grey to blue and silvery green as they did so, and stretching out like hands. First the fronds at the end of one branch would unroll and fan out; then a branch of the other tree, stretching and following, would produce a frond, which unrolled quickly beside that of its companion. What one plant did, the other responded to, as if there were a kind of speech in their movements, as if there were here the kind of sportive exchange people are used to seeing in the movements of animals. The fronds of the larger tree moved toward those of the smaller. Both fronds fanned out, until they resembled the bones of hands; then the fan of the larger tree closed over that of the smaller, clasping it, and then merging with it to form a new, many-boned hand. All over the wall this was taking place.

Harcourt, in the stunned confusion of his mind, flashed momentarily on other experiences and other sights, trying to make sense of what he saw, and

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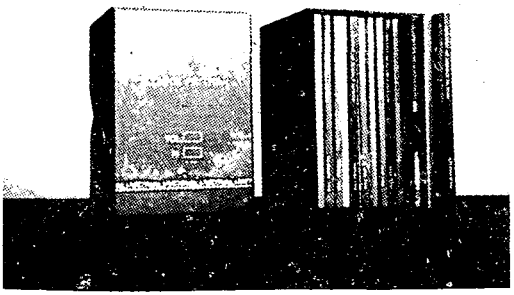
to draw some comparison. He thought of a tawny field at the edge of a leafless woods, of a snowy woods, of a woods full of autumn leaves, or bright new leaves. He thought of a paisley cloth full of swirls and fronds. He thought of a Cecropia moth, come suddenly out of a cocoon onto a twig, to stretch its new wet wings while they grew their patterns of white and red and lavender and silver against a dusty background. His mind failed to make any connections or to describe what he was seeing at all.

Now the branches and the twigs were almost totally mingled, and nearly too numerous to be a design. Blossoms appeared on them. These were enormous sprays of radiant, iridescent small flowers, like dust or mist, or light on a fountain. They burst from the larger tree first, in white, foaming, luminous froth; then the smaller plant sent out its sprays, greenish-white and silvery.

On the floor were a few tatters of clothes. Little of them was left, but among them seemed to be a man's brown suit sleeve, part of a green-and-silver striped silk article that must have been a woman's blouse, and a silver leaf-shaped earring. Above these traces the sprays of flowers glowed, and a few petals, wonderfully bright, came gliding slowly down, reflecting glints of color as they fell.



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In which Mr. Gotschalk tells — in his unique and colorful style — about a bar-room wager of heroic proportions, at The First and Last Chance Saloon down in Louisiana territory.

Take A Midget Step

BY

FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

Wellsir, I thought I had met every brand of barroom conman and hustler and pimp this side of the Mississippi Trench, but this tomato-faced Cajun rube talking to me today took the cake. I was in Napoleonville, Louisiana Territory, having beer and shrimp at The First and Last Chance Saloon, and this guy sidles up to me and says he has a con, a sucker bet, and that it will make me rich. I sized him up even as I hefted the frost-jacketed mug of beer up to my walrus-mustachioed upper lip. He looked eager and bumpkinish and candorous, and yet there was a flicker of true evil in his dull eyes. I decided to put him down quick, there was something in his aura that was subtly ominous.

"Who the hell *are* you?" I said, casual-like, "I look like a pigeon to you?"

"I'm Joe Boudreaux, the bridge-tender," he said. "I see you come in here a lot. I come in here a lot." He didn't act offended even one little bit by my two questions.

"Why should you share a con with me? If it's so good, use it yourself."

I brushed a shiny green *drosophila* off a fat spillway shrimp, picked away the shell, and de-veined the dorsal ridge of its dark alimentary sludge. The shrimp here were huge and tasted great, though cuisine was not even a remote consideration. Joe's face was full of purplish filigrees of broken capillaries. I looked at my reflection in his big black pupils and got fascinated by it for a minute, so that there were no eye-contact messages really being exchanged.

"I can't read good," he said. "I got this message, and I can't trust anybody to read it to me. I figure you being a prof and all, I can trust you." I forgot

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to say that I am an itinerant academician, an interesting anachronistic fossil of a traveling school teacher. I visit four sagging cypress-wood schools along the Bayou LaFourche in as many days, and I try to drum some modern media inputs into the thick, unresponsive heads of this lost race of Acadians. Were it not for my old and tattered LSU doctoral gown, I would probably be tarred and feathered, or made to walk the log over the alligator pits. These swarthy Cajun squatters don't like outsiders.

"My dear fellow," I began, very much aware of my own syrupy condescension, "your trust in me is misplaced. How do you know what I might do if you shared a great secret with me?"

"You went to LSU. That's enough for me. You must be a real prof if you went there." I thought briefly, and not without some now mellowed bitterness, about the dozens of times I had been denigrated by Tulane profs, as well as by an occasional Princeton or Yale man. Harvard graduates didn't seem to come this far south; but, then, Harvard had been a sociologic nostalgia museum since about 2012, the same year all of New England seceded from President Caroline Kennedy's administration.

"If you can't read, how do you know this great secret is great enough to make *us* rich?" I asked, emphasizing the objective case of the pronoun and jutting my jaw in toward him. He looked furtive and yet catbirdish, and I was gearing up to ignore him, but then I began to feel some interest in him, too. He looked around at all the dirty-jeaned men standing at the bar, and at least two of them gave him a private teasing smile. Apparently Joe was not a character that the peer group took very seriously. A tugboat whistle sounded down the bayou, and Joe got up quickly. He looked at me with what I held to be a convincing sincerity. "I'll be in the bridgehouse," he said. "I'll see you when you cross over, later."

Anything worth a damn in Louisiana Territory was built by Huey Long 150 years ago: highways, bridges, colleges, temples, stadiums, aviaries, opera houses, monoliths, gladiator arenas, all of it; and the fleets of hydrochloride-powered minicars he put out in 1939 were still around. They would run in kitten-purr silence for two years without re-carbolization. They were the precursors of the atomic-powered aircraft carriers and subs that ran silent and long on the densely compressed molecular nodules. Anyway, I flopped into one outside the saloon, closed the bubble-canopy, luxuriated in the freon-rush of refrigerated air on my neck, and drove off for the bridge. The beer and the shrimp felt just perfect in my digestive tunnels, and I could already feel the sedatory peristalsic rhythms of satiety. Sure as hell I was going to fall asleep again and have to

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ɔark the car and take a nap. The crush-ɛd-shell road was dusty-white, and the ɔoxy minicar generated a solitary ·oostertail as I accelerated up the wide, leserted main street. An armadillo, big ıs a hog, scuttled into the honeysuckle hickets in the graveyard where Val-:our Aime's mausoleum still stood, hough now cocooned in 200 years of hick vines and lichens. This marvel-ous man would have been ahead of his time, no matter what years he had spent with us. I swung the car left along the levee and onto the short bridge. Joe came down out of the control house and handed me a small square package.

"Trust me," he said, again in that curious admixture of furtiveness and knowingness, "and I'll trust you. Tell me what you think the next time you're here." Another whistle sounded, and Joe disappeared up the ladder.

I made it down to Labadieville School about two o'clock, but the kids were having a baseball game; so I sat in the car and watched them. Ever since Ron Guidry made the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2020 (and, for that matter, for many years previous), every young boy in Louisiana Territory wanted to be a baseball pitcher. They all grew mustaches, shot birds and hooked gar in winter, and played ball from about March through November. I unwrapped the package Joe had given me. Inside was a cassette, what we called "talk-cubes," but I could see right away it was something special: it had the Rienzi crest on it, and that meant that it was contraband, stolen, or smuggled, or liberated from the infamous Rienzi Plantation down the bayou at Thibodaux. The Rienzi library had the largest store of pornocubes in the area, as well as far more dangerous and valuable stuff, like trivideo vivisection cubes, bomb-making kits, poisons, spells, and antidotes, perfect-crime paradigms, barter scrip reroducers, ionization wands, voodoo items, you name it. It was rumored that old Vernon Galliano, the overseer there, was in routine daily contact with the forces of the Devil and Hell, and with alien suppliers on other planets. I felt uneasy already. I activated the cube:

THIS IS GIVEN TO JOE BOUDREAUX BECAUSE, KNOW IT OR NOT, HE SAVED MY DAUGHTER FROM DROWNING LAST SUMMER. REWARDING HIM WITH BARTER SCRIP WOULD BE USELESS, LIKE GIVING A MONKEY A TIME BOMB. SO I AM GIVING HIM A RIDDLE, AN ENIGMA, AN INFINITE-REGRESSION PUZZLE, THAT WILL WIN HIM ACCLAIM, REDRESS FOR PAST INSULTS, SWEET AND TOTAL REVENGE, AND A SOURCE OF GOOD AND CRUDE FUN. THIS AUDIO CUBE WILL SELF-DESTRUCT AFTER FIVE PLAYS. I AM INSTRUCTING JOE TO SEEK OUT DOCTOR JOE TAYLOR, PHD, LSU, 1958, TO SHARE IN THESE REWARDS. THIS IS IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE TIME WHEN DOCTOR JOE READ MY BLUFF IN A POKER GAME AND WON A HUNDRED DOLLAR POT. ON A PROF'S SALARY, THAT WAS A RARE DISPLAY OF GUTS. READ THE ENCLOSED SECRET WITH CARE, DOCTOR JOE, BECAUSE JOE BOUDREAUX CANNOT READ, AND BE INFORMED AND BE INCREDULATED, AND TAKE CARE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIDDLE.

It was Galliano's voice all right,

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and I well remembered the night I took the $100 pot. It was a brash move, but it had made me a local hero. And, would you believe it, Galliano was bluffing on a king-high hand of no value! The audio keyed off and the cube fluxed open. I drew out a folded parchment on which was written in bold India-ink calligraphy, the following:

> TELL A BOMBASTIC MAN THAT HE MAY NOT CROSS A ROOM IN SUCCESSIVE HALVINGS OF DISTANCE, AND TOUCH THE FAR WALL IN THE FOLLOWING MANNER: THAT HE MAY PACE OFF HALF THE DISTANCE TO THE WALL, AND THEN HAVE AS MANY SUCCESSIVE HALVINGS OF THE REMAINING DISTANCE AS THEY DESIRE; AND THAT NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES THEY HALVE THE DISTANCE THEY WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO TOUCH THE WALL. BET A PENNY FOR THE FIRST HALVING AND DOUBLE THE BET EACH TIME. SAY TO THE BOMBAST: I'LL DOUBLE THE MONEY EVERY TIME YOU HALVE THE DISTANCE, AND WHEN YOU TOUCH THE WALL, YOU WIN IT ALL. IF YOU CAN'T TOUCH THE WALL, YOU PAY ME DOUBLE MONEY FOR EACH SUCCESSIVE DOUBLING OF THE RETURN DISTANCE AND YOU CAN CALL A HALT ON THE RETURN TRIP ANYTIME YOU WANT TO.

This was important, I suppose, but so was my afternoon nap, and I fell asleep. One of the mustachioed baseball players rapped on the canopy and grinned at me. It was three-thirty and school was out. I drove over the bayou to watch the gar fishers. The cobwebs began to clear in my head and I considered the audio and graphic messages in the cube. My reaction was diffuse, I suppose, and I was still having to wait to wake up. My reaction to the cryptic missal was nonplused. I hardly knew what to make of it, though knowing Galliano well, I suspected some sort of cruel hoax, some complex practical joke with sadistic components. I saw immediately that it was riddle of infinite division and that, at least in microcosmic theory, it would indeed be impossible to touch the hypothecated barroom wall. As I sat there in the cool 1939 Huey Long minicar, cool even in my black and purple academic gown, I pondered Galliano's curious gift to Joe and me. I am not above pecuniary motives, and, given that a major con scheme would not afford great risk to my personal ass, I could gear up to find a plump mark, a fat betting pigeon, a fitting target for the con, if indeed we could get anybody to sniff at such overtly preposterous bait.

It didn't take nearly as long as I thought. Irby Dugas was our man. He was a pathognomic Cajun: a bland mixture of midget and Negro and Sabine and bayou mud and nutria-head, but he was oil-lease rich, thanks to pure chance, and he greedily allowed his new money to heap generalized credibility on him. He was about 150 years old, though his liver must have had 300 years of mileage on it, and his 87 percent bionic body was antithetical to the Temple of the Holy Spirit. He was a high-stakes poker player, who thought that drawing to an inside straight was reasonable. I don't have to

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ddend the note that Irby was a regular ɔser. Nontheless, he was a local "Bet . Million Batsby," and rumor had it ıat high-rollers from other parts of ıe continent sought him out as both a hallenge and an easy mark. I knew im from way back. So I felt no comunction about dropping in on him unnnounced. As usual, his personality bliterated everything else, and I bare- got out the generalities of the bet beɔre he crashed in with his willingness ɔ take it.

"You telling me I get as many halfteps as I want to touch the wall?" he sked, loudly, and the question was a ıockingly derisive statement. He was ɐading the calligraphy version of the et, though rumor again had it that Iry bragged about his illiteracy. He ould talk the balls off a brass monkey ı both English and Cajun French, but ut any alphabetical gestalt in front of is fish-colored eyes, and he drew a erceptual blank.

"Right," I said, "but I think there's trick to it. I've been trying to figure it ut myself." It was sweet playful adism to say this openly to Irby, beause he ignored it completely. He ɔok my lip-service caution as a sign of tupidity. I didn't feel any special ranor for him, though he had insulted my SU doctorate more than once, and alvays in front of his cronies.

"And you say that Dummy Joe oudreaux is staking his bet?"

"Right, but somebody else must be taking him."

"And he asked you to find a taker?"

"Correct."

"He's dumber than I thought. Once you get an inch away from the wall, you're bound to touch it in a few moves. Half-steps, eh?" Irby bellowed at a white-jacketed butler to bring drinks. Irby never asked people what they wanted to drink, he just had it placed down in front of you. The butler brought apricot daiquiri's and they were wonderfully refreshing.

"And he wants to bet a penny to start? A *penny*?"

"And double the bet every half-step."

"I might do it, but he'll have to start at a dollar, not a penny." I was flabbergasted by Irby's recklessness. My mouth started to sag open, and so I took a long, icy pull at my drink.

"That's upping the stakes tenfold. Unless Joe's got one hell of a confident backer, I don't see how he can handle that."

"It's chicken feed the other way. Tell you what: I stake my boy, Gaspard, to the bet. It'll give him a good laugh. The whole thing can't be worth more than a hundred measly dollars or so, so tell Dummy Joe to put up or shut up. And, by the way, *I* set the time and place, and I set it tomorrow night, right here in my gameroom." With this incredible display of short-sightedness, Irby turned and walked off across the spongy St. Augustine lawn toward his square-col-

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umned plantation. You smug, oily macrocosm, I thought, the microcosm will be your down fall.

Joe and I showed up right on time the next night, but Irby kept us waiting awhile. He finally wheezed into the gameroom, as if he were a Hollywood tycoon, ready to answer ten phones, hire a major actor, fire a major actor, and sit at a huge desk while a nymphet did a fellatio capricioso on him from beneath the desk. I thought Joe was going to fall on his knees before Irby, or maybe kiss his ring, or shine his shoes. The subservience he radiated was remarkable, and it served only to reinforce Irby and extinguish Joe. But Irby's casual dominance was to fade rapidly. His 20-year-old son, Gaspard, came in. He was a cocky, darkly handsome, devil-may-care boy, who was rumored to be a holy terror in his LSU frat house. He swaggered, as if he were miming, caricaturing confidence, but this was his natural gait. Irby eased down into a beautiful leather chair and bellowed for the butler to bring drinks. Tonight they were stingers and tequila shooters and lime rickeys.

"This room is forty feet long," Irby now purred, his voice dripping the heaviest slurs of condescension, "and twenty feet wide. Which way you want to lose your money?" Joe looked terrified. He was afraid to take one of the drinks the butler had placed on the massive ebony sideboard. So I got one for him. The tray was full of heavy, frosted, crystal decanters and glasses, far cry from the brown glass bottl and greasy trays of the saloon in Nap leanville.

"Your choice," I said. "Look, yo can back out of this, Irby, there's catch to it, I'm certain." Again, it w delicious of me to say this.

"Too late," he said, "and tough sh for youall. We'll do it the quick way, won't take long. Get halfway acros Gas." I produced a tape measure. Jo held it against the cypress wall-bas and the tape sang a little metallic *stre* to as I crossed to the other wall. Ga pard sauntered out and stood at th ten-foot mark. He looked like a Olympic diver psyching up to do a fu 3½ without needing the psyching up an amazing stance of agility and stee spring kinesthesias.

"You win one dollar," I said, "co you two to go the next five feet."

"You the one it's costin'," Irb sneered. "Gimmee my dollar and pu up your two. You got enough mone to cover these bets, Joe?" Joe looke obediently at Irby, and yet I thought, *hoped*, I saw a flicker of fight in tho dull eyes. Maybe beneath his sleaz veneer of subservience there was som thing worthy or gritty or clever or ev lutionarily adaptive. I shot in a quic lie to Irby:

"I'm holding the money, cash, pl a credit voucher on the Lafourc Bank. He's covered, good as gold." flashed the $700 dollars in my walle this all I could get together. I knew I

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y was on the board of the Lafourche ank. He didn't ask to see the letter of 'edit, and that was lucky, because I dn't have one. He eyed me, suspiously, then lowered his lids, as if to ıform me that my visual presence was ɔ insignificant that he would just as ɔon have a nap.

"Well, then, you keep tabs," he ıid, "it'll save us the chicken feed till 're through." I measured off five ɔet, and Gaspard got on the mark uickly, his sharp-toed boots hitting ıe heel of my hand. It was a flagrant ıolation of my privacy bubble, but xpected in this case, and my flare of nger was assuaged by the knowledge ıat, very soon now, both Irby and his waggering protegé would be begging ɔr mercy. I was thinking about the act that the stakes doubled on the ack away from the wall, and wonderıg whether Irby or Gaspard had sense nough to realize that *the wall could ever be touched!* I looked up from my neeling position and my face was lose to Gaspard's fly. He knew the ymbolism of the position and sneered. Ie thought it perfectly normal for pedgogues to be on their knees before im, and I fancy he saw my face as ome sort of irrumative target.

"Two for you," I said, "bet you our you can't go two and a half feet."

"Shiutt," Gas leered, "just you mark t off, prof." I did, and Gas did a standng broad-jump onto the mark, pretendng to stomp my fingers. I withdrew my ıand in time, and Irby laughed.

"Cost you eight to move one and a fourth," I said, getting up and turning my back on Gas as regally as I could. The law required that I wear my academic robes at all times, but there were precious few regal connotations in them; nonetheless, I nutured the idea that the regalia retained a certain intimidating symbolism, and as I crossed the room to get another drink, I remembered how omnipotent it felt to march in the faculty processionals at LSU, how the humidity ennobled and enrichened the air, and how this seemed to infuse the very bones of the dead in their crypts, as well as the bones of us, the last surviving humanoid academicians.

"How many inches in a foot and a quarter?" I asked Irby, standing in front of him like a robed judge before a corpulent barrister. I stirred my drink with studied casualness.

"Hell if I know," he retorted. "You the prof."

"Fifteen," I said, feigning thoughtfulness, "yes, fifteen." I returned to where Gaspard stood and marked off the distance. He again got on the mark with affected speed.

"Sixteen dollars is the bet," I said, "and you move seven and a half inches." I made some notes on my pad with my bold red felt pen:

TRIAL	BET	WON	DISTANCE
1	1	1	10
2	2	3	5
3	4	7	2.50
4	8	15	1.25
5	16	31	7.50

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"So far, we owe you $31," I said, getting an appropriately misleading air of resignation into my voice, "but I still think there's a trick to this."

"*We're* trickin' *you*, that's what's happening!" Irby brayed, as Gaspard nudged up onto the 7½ inch mark. Joe began to show some signs of life now, shifting in his Indian-squat position, stroking the shiny cypress floor, drinking his second tequila shooter, and drumming soft paradiddles on his glass.

"We need a ruler," I said, "it is vital that the measurements be accurate."

"You damn right it is," Irby said. He went to a desk and produced a steel ruler, all white and blue and red, with United Fruit Company emblazoned on it. He handed it to me, holding it just distant enough so that I had to overextend my arm to reach it. He smiled, as if the ruler was a pair of his own, private, loaded dice. I put the three and three-fourth inch mark on the floor with my red pen. Gaspard scruffed his boots on the floor and moved up to it.

"That was the $32 move," I said, "cost you $64 to move half that."

"Still chicken feed," Irby said, "finish it off quick, Gas."

"What's half of three and three-fourths?" I asked, earnestly, because I did not know at once, "what's half of three-point-seventy-five inches?"

"Divide it by two and find out," Irby laughed, and he curled his heavy upper lip into a sneer, downing his drink.

"I don't want to stand here al night," Gaspard said, taunting. "Can' you prof creeps divide by two?"

"A mite musty on my math m'boy," I alliterated to Gaspard, "let me see." I wrote down the problem on my pad and came up with 1.875 inches.

"It's one-point-eight-seven-five inches," I said.

"Ain't no such thing as one-point-eight-seven-five," Irby scoffed. "You done it wrong, prof." I moved to show him my bold red figures on the pad, but he waved me off. I showed it to Gaspard.

"It's a split cunt hair less than two inches, Pop," he said. "He's right." I examined the United Fruit Company ruler and saw that it had tenths on one side.

"Excellent!" I said, with an affected air of academic aplomb. "This splendid United Fruit Company ruler has metric divisions, rows of heroic linear segments in pure tenths. Accuracy is thus assured!"

"You talk pretty, prof," Irby said, and I thought I discerned a vestigial glimmer of apprehension striated in with his condescension. "Just you mark it off right."

"I regret to tell you that my eyesight is failing," I said, and I began to feel increasingly confident, even luxuriative, "though I do believe I have a pair of venerable eyeglasses here in the folds of my doctoral garb — yes, here they are — and I do believe we require a light of sorts. May we use the tensor?" I pointed to a small goose-neck tensor lamp or

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the table where Irby's collection of Ben Franklin Mint silver medallions lay in their leather cases. He jerked his head in gruff silent agreement, and I went to get the lamp. A tugboat whistle sounded in the distance, and Joe looked like he was supposed to get up and leave, but he smiled a sheepish look instead and drank down his shooter. The tensor lamp threw a bright circle of light on the floor, and I could see fine dust motes there. I carefully marked off 1.9 inches on the floor.

"Sixty-four dollars is the bet," I said, and the distance is 1.9 inches." Gaspard moved onto the new mark.

"We win again," Irby said, now moving to sit closer to Gaspard. "Hey, how much is that? You keeping count?"

"You've won seven consecutive trials," I said, looking at my growing sheet of figures, "you've won $127, and you're approximately two inches from the wall."

"Hot damn!" Irby slapped his knee, "money's doubling and the space is halving, polish it off, Gas!" Joe now moved closer to Gaspard, emboldened by the two shooters in his blood, his brogans scruffing a mark on the floor. I do believe he enjoyed having the sides of his shoes hard down on Irby's floor.

"I must be entirely fair to you," I tried to sound paternalistic to Irby, "half of 1.875 is .9375. Now, for your final moves to the wall, may I suggest we agree on *one inch* as the current distance, rather than 9/10 of an inch? It would greatly facilitate the successive halvings, and the difference is a mere tenth of an inch." Irby looked up at me, suspiciously.

"We'd be giving youall a tenth, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"We ain't givin' you suckers nothin'."

"C'mon, Pop, I'm almost there," Gaspard whined, "one-tenth either way ain't gonna cut no ice."

"You sure, boy?"

"Well hell yes I'm sure. Besides I can't see the floor close enough to move one-tenth of an inch."

"You don't have to do it with your feet," Joe finally spoke up; "you can use your fingers." I was happy that Joe said that. It wasn't much, but it was an operant-assertive remark. Then he further surprised me by telling Gaspard that he didn't have to keep standing there, that he could go ahead and sit down if he wanted to, and that the mark on the floor wasn't going anywhere. Gaspard lifted his eyebrows at Joe, as if to say who the hell you think you talking to, boy, and then he scruffed the floor, noisily, like a young bull pawing the dirt, and sauntered over to the sideboard to get a drink. I marked off exactly one inch from the wall and stood off from it, looking down at the red stripe like an artist appraising the flow of a line or the cut of a sculpted bust.

"One inch away," I said, "and the bet is $128. Cost you $128 to move half an inch."

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"Like I said, prof, it's costin' *you*, not me," Irby said, "costin' Dummy Joe there, and whoever his dumb-ass staker is."

"I don't have to stand there," Gaspard said, swirling his drink and spitting ice cubes into the glass from the corner of his mouth, "just *bet*, and move the mark. Let the damned mark do the moving." I looked at Irby and he nodded his head in mock benevolence. I had some difficulty sitting down by the one-inch mark, it was too close to the wall. My purple and black doctoral mantle (God, I still venerate, I still *love*, the traditions of Huey Long's LSU Tigers!) got in the way, and the folds of the gown felt like a massive curtain on the stage of an opulent 1920's movie house. The heavy gold tassel that hung from the top of my mortarboard cap hovered in my vision at ten o'clock lateral, its individual strands like miniature hawsers of the finest gold-leaf tint.

"*One inch!*" I repeated, intoning the short words importantly, sounding judicial, pontificatory, ultimatumly. "You've won $255. The bet is $128 that you can't move the mark half an inch closer to the wall. Do you accept the wager?" I took out a freshly ironed, threadbare, cotton handkerchief (a luxury in these polyester times) and wiped the area around the floor-mark carefully.

"Does a hobby-horse have a wooden ass?" Irby said to me, winking at Gas. "My boy takes that bet, and my boy wins again. Just you draw us that half-inch mark." My mortarboard hit the wall as I bent to make the new mark. The tensor lamp revealed the tiny area on the floor in bright clarity: the 200-year-old cypress planking, the ebony stain, the filler, the varnish, the buff-marks, the wax, the deeply slumbering *caversa* of wood silent beneath the several microscopic layers of epithelium. I took off my cap and frisbied it a few feet away.

"You breakin' the law, prof," Gaspard said; "you know you can't take off your funny hat."

"We won't turn him in this time, Gas," Irby said. "Besides, if I didn't have any more hair than that on my head, I'll be damned if I wouldn't keep my hat on all the damned time." I ran my hand over the top of my moderately bald head and felt the reassuring transverse ridge of my osseous cranial fissure. Bending over close to the wall, I carefully drew a line on the floor one-half inch away.

"There it is," I said, "there's the line that says you now have, let's see, ah yes, $511."

"Now we're getting into fair winnings," Irby said. "So now we bet you double $128 — how much is that — yeah, we bet you $256 we can move that mark half the distance to the wall, right?"

"Successive halvings is the bet," I replied, "the bet is $256 that you can't move a quarter-inch."

"That's what I just said, prof,"

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Irby's voice was a sing-songy mockery. "We'll take that bet, and take the money both. Make the mark."

"You don't have to make it on the floor," Joe spoke up again; "mark it on a piece of paper."

"Yeah." Gaspard seemed to agree immediately with Joe, though it sounded like Gas had had the idea first and was putting Joe down because he hadn't actually made the suggestion. "Make a map of it and finish it off quick. I got a date with a chick with a bionic snatch, I got to pop up to Baton Rouge."

"I don't know," Irby snickered, "I kinda like to see ole prof and Joe down there on the floor. How many moves you figure it'll take you to touch the wall, Gas?"

"Four, five," Gas answered, "quarter of an inch ain't much different than a pincha owlshit. Shouldn't take long." Irby laughed. He and his son were still oblivious of the trap. They were oblivious of the infinitude of successive halvings. There was a heavy, four-sided, card-playing structure in the room, its' slightly sunken surface padded with green felt, illuminated by a single lamp in a shallow-dished, cymbal-shaped shade, suspended from the ceiling by a long, adjustable cord. Irby heaved himself up out of the chair and walked over to the card table. His gait apotheosized territoriality. The very molecules of the air seemed to part for him to walk through. Joe got up from the floor, stretched, and rubbed his knees. I got up and felt the bony fulcrumic somesthesis of my tibias supporting my femurs and sacral girdle. The sensory adaptation synapsed up my spinal king-post and auraed in my omniscient cephalic sphere. In just a very few seconds, I was once more proprioceptively upright, biped, and at home in the graviton matrix. I then thought it appropriate to be in full academic garb for the closing minutes of our drama. So I retrieved my mortarboard and set it on my head at a severe academic angle of rake. Spurious or no, it gave me a feeling of dominance. Irby got a sheet of waxy vellum stationary from a desk and placed it down in the center of the table. He flicked on the light and pulled up one of the plushly upholstered chairs, motioning jerkily for us to sit down. I sat across from him and Gas across from Joe. Joe's eyes looked dull as usual, but there was an interesting mixture of expectancy and hardness there too. Joe was beginning to look more predatory as we went along; maybe he thought that LSU PhD's had magical powers. I was certain that Irby's eyes were getting an uneasy look about them. Gaspard put his heavy forearms out on the table, and I could see the date and his fraternity letters on his massive LSU class ring: CLASS OF 2085 and PKA. Joe kept his hands in his lap, his deferent Cajun shoulders slumped in appropriate minority-group submissiveness. Outside the house, covered in lagustrum, a four-ton compressor pumped

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silent, sighing, 68-degree air into the room.

"*Draw,*" Irby commanded, pointing to the paper. I drew a bold horizontal line across the paper and printed WALL above it with the broad side of my felt pen.

"Here, prof, use something good," Irby laughed and produced a gold and platinum Cross ballpoint pen, circa 1990. It had a Superfine stylus point and felt unique and good in my prehensile grasp. I placed the United Fruit Company ruler at 90-degrees to the red wall-line, studiously adjusted my glasses, made a tiny point one-fourth inch away, and drew the superfine line parallel to the fat red wall-line. I'll never forget how it looked. It looked like this:

WALL

"God, that's perilously close," I said, removing the ruler, "and that, gentlemen, is the $1,023 line. Dugas and his son now have won ten times in a row."

"You better have the money, prof." Irby sounded threatening and yet afraid. "I ain't no small-peanuts gameplayer, you know."

"An LSU man never welshes on a wager, Irby," I replied, aware of the fraternity stupidity of the statement; "be assured the bet is completely staked. Are you ready to continue?" Irby looked at Gaspard and the communicative aethers seemed decidedly sober between them.

"Draw," Irby said, and I drew the $2,047 line one-eighth of an inch from the red wall-line.

"Your total winnings are $2,047," I said. I took a deep breath and decided to give him his options. Maybe I was getting scared, but maybe I was getting cocky, too, Nickel-dime poker is fun and social and harmless, but high-stakes can lose friends and money both. Even in this, the year of our Lord, 2085 AD, two thousand dollars was a month's rent for most people. "I must remind you of the precise conditions of the wager. If and when you touch the wall, so to say, if and when you close the remaining distance entirely, you win the total cumulated amount of money. However, if you choose to quit at any time, to admit defeat, you pay double the amount at that juncture—"

"Yeah, yeah," Irby waved me off, "I know all that."

"Wait," Gaspard said, his voice suspicious, "you saying that if we quit right now, we'd owe you, whatever it is—"

"Four-thousand ninety-four dollars and fifty pennies," I said, "though I haven't seen a copper penny in thirty years."

"It's a one-way bet, Pop," Gas said to Irby, his voice just ever so slightly tremulous. "We win it all, or we lose double. We pay through the nose to get out."

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"You locked in, boy," Joe said to Gas, his voice quiet and ominous, "you gonna lose your coon-ass hide." My eyes snapped left to look at Joe, and a flare of autonomic fear formed and spread in my viscera. Red anger colored Gas's face, and Irby's mouth sagged open, purple in the dim light. The very few intervening seconds were pregnant with tension. Gas brought his heavy fist down on the table. "Hold you tongue, you fuckin' nutria-head," he hissed, "I'll gut you laka saccalait and use you for bait!" He leaned in toward Joe and reminded me of the posture of the spitting cobra. Joe's face was not fully visible beneath the low-hanging lamp, but the set of his mouth and jaw looked unflinching to me. Perhaps there was a slight autonomic compression of his fish-colored lips. Irby's face relaxed slowly, and Gas eased back into his chair, tense and tremulous.

"Good Godamighty," Irby said, returning to breezy, incredulous tones, "let a half-breed bridge tender think he's going to win a bet, and he gets right uppity. How'd you like to be in — how do they say that, Gas — yeah, *perpetual servitude*? How'd you like to live here on my plantation and work in the cane fields till you die? Eh? How'd you like that, boy?" Joe's face was washed in shadow, expressionless and enigmatic. "You come up short on this bet and you'll be in slave row, along with the other niggers."

"You ain't exactly no pure-bred Creole," Joe said, "and I say you are going to lose this bet." His voice was surprisingly authoritarian, and I found it difficult to believe he was actually talking in such a manner.

"Prof," Irby began, shifting his posture, still languidly confident in body language, "you ought to watch the kind of people you associate with. I could have you and Dummy Joe here bounced out on your asses. Now you tell him to watch his *mouth*. You tell him to use his mouth to say yessir, and to eat his barbecued gar with it, and his nutria stew, and his slimy okra, and his white rice and red beans—"

"Gentlemen," I began, in my best conciliatory-arbitrator, faculty-senate tone, "let us strive to be civil to each other. So much of our interaction is at the level of personal insult. We have agreed to a wager that very likely will alienate us. Let us function within the limits of that — let us function within the formal constraints of the wager." I thought I would be crassly interrupted, but no one spoke. Then Irby reached out and took the sheet of paper from the center of the table. He examined it carefully, but with that certain manner that makes an onlooker aware that he did not really understand it, yet was in the role of totally understanding it.

"Ain't much space left there Gas," he said, and there was a sliver of uncertainty in his voice. He seemed to feel that, if he spoke out confidently, the blustery plosiveness of his expressivity would serve to complete the impossible

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task, and win the bet.

"I smell a rat, Paw," Gas said, taking the paper and examining it, "I used a micrometer once on a Porsche, and it read down to thousandths of an inch. It'll cost us $4,094 to quit right now, and we are still one helluva long way from the wall."

"Like I say, boys, ain't no way you can win this." It was Joe's voice, and now he sounded funereal, sepulchral, somber in his pronouncement.

"Silence, please, Joe," I said, "give the gentlemen time to appraise their position. Dugas is well experienced in matters of wagering."

"Well, now," Irby began to Gas, "the closer we get to the wall, the more money we win, right?"

"Right—"

"Then let's get closer. Ain't hardly no space left. Move it, prof, and then write down that we double our money again."

"Wait a minute, Paw—"

"Wait, hell. We're getting into big stakes now." I drew the one-eighth inch line, and wrote $4095 by it.

"You win again," I said, "you have a total of four thousand ninety-five."

"You better have it on you," Irby growled.

"Don't you worry, I do," I said, figuring quickly on my pad. "Quit now and you owe us $8,190. Move one-sixteenth closer and you win that amount."

"Why the hell should I quit for eight thousand when I can win eight thousand by moving the mark?"

"Your choice," I said, beginning to feel nervous about when Irby was going to catch on to the futility of the bet.

"*Move* it," Irby grated, scowling at me. I seemed to see the first cues of defeat in his eyes. I was strangely moved.

"No, wait," Gas said, "I see what's going on here—"

"*Move* it, prof," Irby hissed.

"Wait, Paw, we can't win—"

"Shut up, boy!" I drew in the one-sixteenth inch line with some difficulty.

"How much we have now?" Irby asked, and his voice connoted the childlike *magic effect* seen in young children and in the worst compulsive gamblers. He actually felt he could *will* the bet won, that nobody would dare make a fool of him, that this was against all natural laws, and that he was immune to laws of immutability; indeed, that he was omnipotent.

"Total winnings $16,383," I said and let out a low whistle. Gas's head was now lowered. He didn't look tumescent anymore. He looked wilted, caved in, catatonic, holistically introversive.

"What the hell's the matter with you, boy?" Irby said to him, shaking him by the arm. "We're sixteen thousand ahead. This pair of pigeons owe us sixteen grand!"

"Cost you thirty-two grand to quit," Joe said, softly and ominously.

"I got thirty-two grand!" Irby flared, and his voice broke, "I got 32

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million, I got 32 *Billion*! I got more money than you can count, coonass!"

"Paw," Gas said, looking at his father, with big, angry, low-viscosity tears welling up in his eyes, "don't you *see*? We can't win this bet."

"Why the hell not?" Irby brayed, and the mutual desperation he and Gas were sharing at the moment made me think they might fall, sobbing, into each others' arms in uncontrolled cataplectic grief.

"Because, don't you see, we can never get more than halfway there, no matter how close we get."

"I don't follow you, boy. As long as we keep moving, we're bound to touch the wall."

"No," Gas's voice was barely audible, "we were halfway there back at the ten'foot mark, and we're still only halfway there." Gas looked at me and there was anger in his eyes, but also something much more complex: a churning humiliation, laced with indignation, and just a faint remaining smidgen of superciliousness. He was a Creole lowered to the caste of a Cajun, a manor lord obliterated by a serf, a king put down by a jester, an elder caught unawares by a novitiate.

"Wait now," Irby said, and I knew that he must be subvocally wailing, "how the hell can we *not* touch the wall as long as we keep moving toward it? It ain't going nowhere, and we are. It's standing stock-still and we are coming at it, on the move, closing in."

"You're out 32 thousand, and that's enough for me," Joe laughed, getting up. "I got better things to do than hang around with losers," He did a strange, nervous-looking little hop, a manneristic klog-step of barely controlled exhuberance, and walked rapidly to the glass doors leading out onto a patio. A brief, massively felt gush of warm, sticky air came in as he opened the doors. "Prof, good buddy, just you give me my share the next time you're in Napoleonville." He closed the doors and I saw him vault lightly over the bushes and disappear. Gas looked fairly bursting with high-pressure anger. I'd swear I could hear the grinding of his teeth.

"Gentlemen," I began, and try as I might, I could not control the quaver in my voice, "I find myself in the unenviable position of—"

"Come off it, prof, don't hand me any syrupy shit."

"I tried to warn you, Irby."

"Yeah, but you set me up, too."

"Hell, man, that's the entire game. You perceived Joe and me as pigeons, and we perceived you as a pigeon." I could feel the blood pulsing in my ears. I summoned up one last ration of formality: "Do you wish to continue with the wager?"

"I can keep going longer than you can, you traitor to the honor of Louisiana State University."

"Keep *going*?" Gas cried out, and then he roared, a shriek of triumph, an animal bellow of something wild. He

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pounded a fierce drumbeat on the table. "That's *it*, by God! We'll keep going forever! You slick paira Cajuns think you hit us with an infinity impasse; *we* say we'll quit when we want to! That's in the bet, right? It says, in plain talk, we can call a halt on the return trip at any time."

"That is correct," I replied, and searched my brain for some reasonable retort, "but surely a reasonable timeframe is implicit. Time is infinite, the bet could drag on for years. In my opinion, the bet must be consummated, forthwith."

"Well, prof," Gas said, his typical sneering-dominance mood returning with remarkable quickness, "I don't think your opinion is worth one little piece of green frog shit."

"You mean as long as we keep moving, we don't have to pay to quit?" Irby asked.

"Damn right," Gas said. He got up and noisily fixed a drink. Irby screwed up his face and leaned back, turning his head around at Gas.

"But you said we could never touch the wall."

"Right," Gas called out and then affected a cocky saunter as he returned to the table, "in fact, Paw, damnit to hell, the bet itself tells us *that*. It says, damn you LSU profs to hell, that we can never do more than *halve the remaining distance*!"

"So now you're saying we can never lose the bet?"

"Right again, so long as we don't admit defeat. So long as we keep moving one thirty-second of an inch, and one sixty-fourth, and one whatever is half of one sixty-fourth—"

"One one-hundred-and-twenty-eighth," I said, "and if you move that close, you win—" Then, Gas surprised me. He let out a loud cry that sounded something like "waugh!" and, as the agonized sound shot out from his mouth, he threw his glass at the far wall. It was a frighteningly fast motion, the sort of speed that only young men can accomplish. The glass sang the briefest aerial whistle and smashed against the mahogany paneling an inch away from a photograph of the Louisiana State Capitol Building, that towering architectural phallus where Huey Long received a single bullet wound so many years ago, and where his aggrieved, half-breed, artistic, physician-assassin received twenty times that many in immediate retribution. Gas ran from the room, and it seemed like scant seconds later when the roar of his jet deltastab sounded.

"That boy's got one helluva temper," Irby growled; "it's gonna get him ina heapa trouble one day." A sonic boom thundered back, and I pictured Gas scorching through the humid black sky, already fifty miles away and approaching Mach II airspeed. Then there was a cottony silence, overspread by the tranquilizing hiss of the air conditioning.

"Damnit, prof," Irby said, after a long moment. "I'll be hanged on a cy-

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press stump if I can figure out how, if a wall don't move, and something moves toward it as many times as I want it to, how it is that I'll never touch it."

"It is what ancient *savants* termed an imponderable question," I answered, and I felt I should be gentle with Irby. "There are examples of this kind of problem in the most ancient literatures."

"What time is it, prof?" Irby didn't seem to be responding in any way to my answer.

"Just past ten." There followed another long silence.

"It'll cost me thirty-two thousand to call off the bet?"

"Yes."

"If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

I felt torn between a sense of greed and power and a sense of modulated compassion for this blustery man, now as humbled as I had ever seen him. I decided to be as objective as I could. After all, I was way ahead of the game and certain to win the bet.

"You might get an actuarial reading, a probability projection, an independent opinion."

"You mean from that wordy, dumb-ass robot the government says I have to keep in my — what the hell do you call it — my *data storage and retrieval crypt*?"

"You're fortunate to own a robot. Few of us are wealthy enough to own one."

Irby pushed a button on the table and the butler appeared.

"Tell that clanking tin hive of Nakajima transistors to get his sheet-metal ass up here," Irby said to the butler. The butler bowed and left. "How the goddamn mother hell can one thing stand still and something else move toward it as long as I say it can, and still not touch it? That beats all I ever heard."

"It's not time that's relevant here," I said, "it's distance. Linear distance. And the conditions of the bet are really stating that the wall can never be reached. Gas had it right: you can never get more than halfway there, whether the distance is ten feet or a trillionth of an inch."

"But I'll always be moving," Irby protested, "and the wall will always be standing still—"

Good evening, gentlemen," the robot said, castering silently over the floor. It's graviton field changed infinitesimally as it crossed one of the thick Persian rugs. The robot was a Robert Redford-Lee Majors physiog combo, and sported a slightly toned-down Schwartzenagger body. It's voice was a John Chancellor archetype.

"Sam, you big tin box, how you doin?" Irby loved to tease the robot.

"Centile ninety-nine," the robot said, "thank you for your inquiry as to my functioning."

"This here is Dr. Joe Taylor, an LSU PhD. Joe, this here is Sam the Tin

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Man, my government-issue robot, and not worth half what I had to pay to get him." I had seen robots before, even talked to a few, but this was by far the most lifelike one I had ever seen.

"I am honored, Doctor," Sam said, and his voice was hugely reinforcing to me. a blend of authoritative objectivity and emotional warmth, rare indeed in humans — perhaps *particularly* rare in humans.

"How do you do," I said, exchanging nods with robot and deciding not to extend my hand to him.

"I'd ask you to sit down, Sam," Irby teased, "but you don't care one way or the other, do you."

"Upright bipedal stance is perfectly acceptable to me."

"Well, don't get any bunions on your size-13 casters, hah hah hah. Now listen close: ole prof here bet me I couldn't touch that wall over there."

"Additional data required." Amazing robot sounds followed: soft declamative clackings, turbine-speed whirrs, and high frequency psychophysical bleepings.

"Sounds like a damn thrashing machine, don't he," Irby laughed. "Ole prof here, Sam, said I could take as many steps as I want, but that each step would have to be half the distance of the one before it. And, he bet me that I could never touch the wall."

"The premise assures the result," Sam the robot said.

"Could I win such a bet?"

"Negative."

"Give me one of those, uh, probability figures you love to spout out."

"Infinity," Sam said, and the word conjured images of both interstellar and microcosmic space. Even my mellowed, philosophic, gently pedantic mind could not deal with the concept of infinitude. It is a concept that is mercifully repressed in my thinking.

"I ain't never heard of no number named infinity," Irby said to Sam. "If 20 to one is a long shot on a horse race, what's the odds on this bet?"

"Infinity to one."

"What's a confidence level on it?" I asked, as Irby scratched his nose in puzzlement. "Point oh oh one is a good level." The soft whirrings and clickings began again, continued for a full minute, and Sam's Redford-Majors physiog-plate winced at least once, as if some *extremis* was setting in.

"Point oh to infinitude," Sam said, "the level does not compute. I am in some danger of overload."

"Infinity ain't no number," Irby said again, "give us a number, Sam."

"Zero to the infinitudinal power," the robot said.

"Is zero a number, prof?" Irby turned to me, as if to demand that I assure him of the robot's competency.

"Beats the hell out of me," I regressed, and then recovering my aplomb, "the term zero has a certain graphic, circular integrity—"

"Come off it, prof, talk straight—"

"It has, also, a certain compelling phonic-audial sculpture," I luxuriated

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and then regressed again: "It also helps in writing tens, twenties, fifties, thousands, and especially billions. I see it as indispensable." I turned to Sam the robot, like a flamboyant barrister spinning to intimidate a cowering witness. It was great fun to know that, no matter what you said to a robot, it would give a superior answer. "What is the core concept here?" I queried. "What is the underlying axiom, the pivotal fulcrum? What precisely is it that disallows Irby from ever touching the wall?" I felt satisfied with my question and settled back to hear the superior response. The answer was gloriously isomorphic with my own reasoning:

"The infinitude of successive halvings of linear distance."

"And what, pray tell, my fine robotic fellow, is the smallest unit of linear distance?"

"An angstrom."

"And how is that unit defined?"

"One-billionth of a meter."

"Jesus H. Christ," Irby muttered, drunkenly, though he was not drunk. "One-billionth of a meter, one-billionth," and his voice trailed off. I believe that the microcosmic magnitude of his plight finally hit him full force. Very briefly, mercifully brief, my thoughts focused on that incredibly dense distance, funneling down to microcosmic scales, where a pinpoint-size creature still possessed cilia and velli and antennae and exoskeletal plates; and where it's nutrients were still ingested, digested, utilized as metabolic life-fuels, and then excreted. Perhaps an angstrom-size creature could touch the wall — but, no! — it, too, would be constrained by the conditions of the bet! My spiraling fantasy stabilized at the level of realizing that automotive cylinders could be rebored as little as 6/1000ths of an inch. I fantasized that billions of angstroms could live in the oil-slick space between the reciprocating pistons and the newly bored cylinder walls. What a swirling, pumping maelstrom of useless fantasy!

"Doctor Prof Joe here owes me $16,383," Irby said to Sam, "and it'll cost me double that to get out of the bet. What do you think I ought to do?"

"Get out of the wager."

"No way for me to win?"

"None."

"Just how the hell can that wall stand still forever, and me move toward it forever, and me never touch it?"

"The bet is a ratio statement, sir. The ratio is constant and is independent of the input of variable raw data."

"Be so good as to give us an algebraic statement of the problem," I said, amiably enough, sensing a moderate Eureka gestalt. The robot's response was remarkably quick in coming:

$$\frac{1}{2}xN = xN + 1$$

"And can this equation be, ah, solved?"

"Negative. It is infinitely expandable."

"A billionth of a meter," Irby mut-

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tered, and his head sagged down on the breastplate of his 100 percent fine-combed Egyptian cotton white shirt.

Wellsir, experience is certainly an exponential process. Live and learn is, in it's own proper context, a nicely open-ended, infinitudinous axiom. It was two weeks later, and I was back at the saloon, eating shrimp and drinking beer. Irby had paid off the thirty-two thousand bet, but he pettily reported me to the parish provosts for removing my mortarboard in his house, this misdemeanor punishable by a $127 fine, which I paid with a one-hundred dollar scrip-note, a twenty-five, and a two. I split the winnings right down the median strip with Joe, and I'll be damned if he didn't give it right back to me to hold for him in trust. He said he didn't need any money, that he wouldn't know what to do with it anyway, and that he didn't trust banks. I told him that money was to spend, but he said he didn't need anything. He finally agreed to buy some new coveralls, a pair of brogans, a triple-X Beaver Stetson, and a new plastic pirogue. One night, he even bought a round of drinks for the applauding crowd at the saloon. He has a new image now and is known up and down the bayou already as the man who won a big bet from Irby Dugas. I can only conclude that bridge-tending is a functionally autonomous vocation, since Joe steadfastly refuses to quit his job and retire. At his level of inconspicuous consumption, he could live forever on his winnings. And bridge-tending does involve power (which surely facilitates functional autonomy), as when Joe throws a heavy-handled switch, and giant gear wheels mesh and groan and clank, and the 100-foot-long roadbed swivels or lifts or arcs to allow the brightly painted tugs to churn through the portals, with a deep, quiet, slow ferocity of terrible propeller screws, the long-stroke diesel engines whining their 21-1 compression-ratio song and shooting their remarkably particulate-free exhaust up out of fat phallic stacks.

I bought a new doctoral robe and mortarboard, a $400 meerschaum calabash, a case of 35-year-old scotch, and a pair of 20X binoculars with a zoom attachment and a camera pod mounted integral. The interest on my winnings is 42 percent annually, and while I now qualify for better housing, I decided to remain in my book-lined cell at the LSU Faculty Club.There is a certain venerable integrity in the thick ivy that covers my cell window.

Joe just came in the saloon and is being greeted loudly and applauded. I believe he perceives me as a powerful hero-figure, but, alas, my fame and his fame will die away over the humid, sodden months ahead. Just as the heat and the baked orange dust of Australia are unconquerable, so must we move very slowly through the unforgivingly infusive, wet, rich air of southern Louisiana Territory. I feel a certain power

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over Irby Dugas now, though I plan to avoid him. For the time being, I am a dominant academic male. I have been toying with ways to solidify my dominance, and the idea came to me the other day that a splendid buttress to my dominance would be to nominate Irby for an honorary doctorate, say, Doctor of Humanities. He could hardly refuse such an overt honor, and then, dubbed with the title, pseudo-reified into an ersatz Ph.D., I believe that the stringent letter and spirit of the territorial statutes would require him to wear the heavy purple and black doctoral robes wherever he goes! The analogy of the ancient mariner's albatross is nudging at my consciousness, but I shall suppress that thought.

TRAVEL TIP

You can drive yourself over the edge
if you ever count parsecs during a space warp.
I knew a voyager who did. Found he'd warped two ways,
came to with intestines in one galaxy,
his epidermis in another.
That was hushed up, naturally.

I sleep through warps.
Try sleeping, sometime.
Sleep's a miracle drug from Earth—
no side effects at all.

—DORIS PITKIN BUCK

Doris Buck died December 4, 1980. She was 82. Over the years we published three dozen of her stories and poems, beginning with "Aunt Agatha," (October 1952), most recently "Please Close the Gate On Account of the Kitten," (April 1975). The poem above has never been published and was in our inventory at the time of her death.

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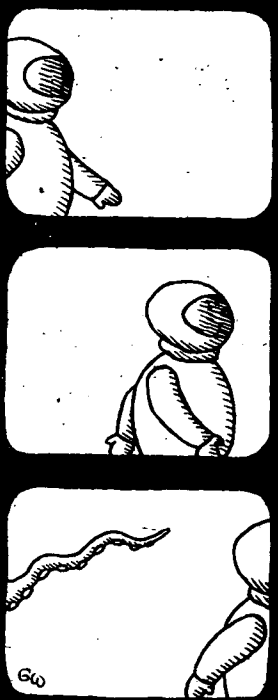
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



DR. J. & MR. H. X 3

In the numerous histories of science fiction that have been appearing over the past decade, I find it interesting that Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeykll and Mr. Hyde* (hereafter known as *J&H* to save space) has not been given much prominence — I've been guilty of neglecting it myself.

While it seems to be generally conceded that *Frankenstein* was the first major novel of s/f, at least on one level, *J&H*, published some 80 years later, is certainly well known, but unremarked as the *next* major manifestation of that most basic of s/f themes, the "mad" scientist who goes where no man should. It is certainly more in the direct historical line than the works of other authors considered to be contributors to the tradition, such as Haggard or even Poe. All mad scientists are the progeny of Victor Frankenstein through Henry Jeykll.

This has been on my mind this month because I've seen a British TV version of *J&H* and two contemporary facsimiles.

I had hopes for the direct version because the British had done so well with *Dracula* a few seasons back. This two-part teleplay devoted to the Stevenson was not exactly memorable, but intelligently done with a couple of interesting factors.

In most ways, it stuck very much to the spirit of the book. However, it is a dissection of good and evil (literally,

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Dr. J's experiments are to separate the two facets of mankind). What the Victorians considered evil would hardly raise an eyebrow these days, and so Mr. H (and Dr. J, too, in the pre-split days) are provided with hints of kinkier matters than are found in the novel. Mr. H, in fact, sings a charming little ditty at one point that ends "...give me the male and female harlot" which I'm pretty sure is not in *A Child's Garden of Verses.*

The other interesting point in this production is the performance of David Hemmings in the major roles, and how they are differentiated. (You will remember him as the poisonously handsome young Mordred in *Camelot.)* He has both aged and fleshed out; what is unusual is that the heavy makeup is used for Dr. J, who is seen as a portly, middle-aged Victorian gentleman.

Mr. H is much more Hemmings as he appears now, I'd guess, with enough of the reptilian beauty left to convey an aging sensualist, *not* the beast-man of other versions.

It's certainly worth seeing if it appears on your local PBS channel.

Later in the month I saw a made-for-TVer from 1979, with the awful title of *The Darker Side of Terror,* but not half so awful as the film itself. It's about a scientist who clones his younger protegee and brings the clone to maturity. It emerges into the world as antisocial to say the least (as well as barbered and clean shaven), and despite attempts to indoctrinate it socially, it insists on killing people. Given the general ineptitude of the cast, it has a point. I mention it only because it's an example of the cliche the *J&H* theme has become.

I'm not sure that applies to *Altered States,* but I'm sure it doesn't, either, despite a production gussied up to disguise its aged origins.

The film is a collaboration between Paddy Chayefsky (writer) and Ken Russell (director), which is a bit of a *J&H* act in itself. I happen to dislike most of Chayefsky's pretentious, pseudo-realistic dramas quite a lot, while I've liked many of Russell's theatrically overwrought productions because they're at least theatrical, a forgotten word in film these days.

Here the Jekyll is an unbearably handsome young researcher who is, you guessed it, going where no man has gone before; the catalyst, instead of a nice, simple injection, is a monstrously tedious combination of magic mushrooms (acquired in a particularly revolting Indian ceremony in Mexico) and sensory deprivation in an isolation tank.

The Hyde that this Jekyll is seeking finally emerges from the tank after several noisy and brightly colored sections of film that can be only described by the hackneyed phrase "trip sequences." And what is Hyde now that he's out? Of all things, a beast-man, this one quite literally, since our handsome blond hero has regressed to a sort of pithecanthro-

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poid, definitely brunet (all over), who runs around in nothing but his hirsuteness and rips up animals in the local zoo.

There are some unusual visual effects here — less the light show numbers, which I didn't find all that original — in particular some startling shots of the hero's musculature writhing and changing under his skin. But never once did I believe that he had turned into that pithecanthroperson, no matter how many bright lights were shone into my eyes, and the film does run on, with much pseudoscientific yammering about the energy released by this change and people sliding in and out of polarization.

It all ends, so far as I could figure out, with the momentous discovery that love conquers all, or at least magic mushrooms.

Early in the film, I thought of, and kept thinking of, a little opus from 1958 called *Monster On the Campus*, a typical B-movie of the period. In it a mild-mannered young professor ingests some ichor from a prehistoric fish, and before you can say pithecanthropus, he's turned into prehistoric man and is running around scaring coeds. It is, of course, yet another *J&H* variant, and I think what I'm curious about is this. Did Mssrs. Chayefsky and Russell think they were remaking *Monster On the Campus*, as the producers of *Alien* simply remade *The Thing*, with a new paint job and some fancy options thrown in? Or did they really think they were doing an original variation on the old, old theme? Or did they, being completely ignorant of s/f in any form, actually think they were doing something totally fresh and creative? One can but wonder.

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Greg Bear once contributed an F&SF cover and here offers his first F&SF story. He tells us that he has been "writing since I was eight years old and sold my first story to Robert Lowndes in 1966, at age fifteen." He has since had three sf novels published, HEGIRA (Dell), PSYCHLONE (Ace) and BEYOND HEAVEN'S RIVER (Dell).

Eucharist

BY

GREG BEAR

Torris?"

Outside the moundhouse, the sun was full, dim and bluish over a grey and purple landscape. Breezes piped through the pumice arches which marked the boundaries of the lava flat. Helga Kitterdan took her hands away from the moundhouse doorframe and wiped them on her coveralls. Inside the moundhouse, it was dark, and the walls were wrapped with the usual strong, twine-like extrusions, faintly wet-smelling.

"Torris?" She stepped into the room. Briefly, she saw her reflection in a water bladder as it filled. Her round eyes stared back at her, framed by short, tousled red hair. This was her thirteenth birthday, and it wouldn't be the same without her friend.

On Helga's birthday a year ago, Torris had hatched a clutch of eggs. Together, they had taught the fuzzy, gangly six-legged youngsters how to speak and read Numisian and English and German. When Torris had gone off on her pilgrimage to the dead city of !Sker, Helga had tended the brood, spending several weeks in the moundhouse, trying to find names for each of them and failing in the long run to tell any of them apart. It had been an uproarious, comical week, and Uva, Helga's father, had written it up for publication in the *Journal of Numisian Studies*.

The bladder released its water through tiny pores, wetting the wall beneath, and her image became milky and vanished.

Frequently, Numisians slept through the day. But Helga had set this day up for a hike a week ago, and Torris had agreed. She walked past the hanging clusters of boobfruit and Torris's piecemeal case of human books.

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"Henga..."

She turned. Torris loomed over her, back pressed against the moundhouse ceiling. The Numisian's legs were pale, almost translucent, and Helga had walked under her without noticing in the dim light.

"What's the matter? Aren't we going?"

"Cannot go in sun night." To Torris, the realm of L was inaccessible, and "light" was no different from "night." "Am something nike sick. Not sick. You know."

"What?" Helga asked, reaching up to feel her friend's luxurious belly fur. She pressed a finger against the abdominal skin beneath. "You're not cold. What kind of sick?"

"Known to some. Must take advantage soon. Comes not very often, nike nava frost. You can hep me."

"Shall I bring the Leg-shaker?" That was the Numisian equivalent of a doctor.

"*Nein, mein Freund. Nieber Mädchen.* Bring *kinder*...."

Torris's voice was hollow, as if echoing the pumice arches outside. "You don't want them to catch anything, do you?" Helga asked. "Why don't I bring my father and Hans the Jar—"

"Chindren!" Torris insisted. "I know, I am adunt. Bring—" The Numisian's legs gave way and she collapsed on top of Helga. Helga squealed and reached out to grab a stool leg. She pulled herself free of Torris's tangled limbs and stood up in the half-dark, breathing heavily.

"I have to get someone," she said. "I'll get my father."

Torris merely twitched her legs and whikkered like a horse.

Outside, Helga pulled her sleeves down and slipped on her gloves and sunglasses. The bicycle leaned up against a dead boobfruit trunk. She swung onto it, kicked back the stand, and pumped furiously for Humble.

When the Galactic Social Engineers team had landed three years ago, six human communities had been established, two on each of Numis's major continents. Uva, Helga's father, was chief sociologist of the Humble station on the subcontinent of Brisbane. The Humble station consisted of six modified moundhouses and a communications hut, all on the western edge of a lava flat. Helga pedaled her bike expertly over the cinder roads, its thick band-metal tires crunching and whanging like struck chimes. She usually crossed the distance in fifteen minutes. Now she did it in eight.

She jumped from the bike and left it on its side in a pile of pumice shards. Her father's moundhouse was deserted, with a note tacked to the door. "Something up. Back in hour. STAY HERE. Doc says we need to supplement our E or we'll get rash again—did you barter with Torris for boobfruit nectar?"

Uva had asked her to request Torris's help in gathering the fruit and

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squeezing it down. The children were ideal boobfruit pickers. Helga plucked the note down and went inside.

On the main desk, maps were spread and covered with scriber markings. Big X's marked the ruins of old Numisian cities and villages. She swept the maps aside, looking for the manuscript which Leg-shaker had dictated to Uva two years ago, dealing with common Numisian illnesses and their herb antidotes. It was gone. She pounded the desk in frustration. Beneath the maps there was only a tapas pad frozen on a single message: *Culture flowering—check with the Jar—why the patterns?*

She hastily wrote out another note and pinned it to the door, then went to the other moundhouses. They were empty, too. Everyone had gone off together, probably to the Numisian tribal center ten kilometers to the north. She was alone, helpless.

She got on her bike again. If there was nobody around, then she had to return to Torris and tend her as best she could. Maybe it wasn't a major disease. Maybe it would cure itself. But Helga had to be with her.

It was noon and the sky was white, a dull, ceramic glistening which hurt the eyes. She put on her glasses and pedaled back along the cinder road.

Hoopies watched from the pumice arch holes, stretching their six long legs and the translucent wing-webbing between. She released one handlebar and reached to feel if her hoopie dartgun was still in her pocket. It was. Hoopies stayed away from people with the guns, which made a characteristic whining noise before shooting self-directing charged darts. The noise was usually enough. In a pinch, the darts could be targeted to hit anything smaller than a dog, which included most of Numis's irritating fauna.

Torris's moundhouse was surrounded by ten of her fourteen youngsters. Helga pushed past a couple of the smaller ones standing in the doorway and stopped, her head snapping back.

A medium-sized youngster was clutching Torris's leg, chewing on a joint. It looked up at Helga, bright eyes impassive, and smiled with its vocal mouth. She had taught them how to smile.

"NO!" Helga screamed. She plucked the child off its mother and flung it against the webbing at the rear of the moundhouse. Torris's joint was bleeding freely, big drops splatting on the dusty floor. Helga had taken enough Numisian first-aid lessons to know how to staunch the flow. She took a strand out of the webbing which held dried boobfruit just beside the bladder. Wrapping it around the wound—noticing that the blood was almost black and not the usual reddish-ocher—she pressed the sticky strand into the incisions with her fingers.

"Torris," she said, shaking the Numisian on the back. "Come on!"

She had never heard of Numisian cannibalism, but there was a lot the

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humans didn't know. Whatever they didn't know, Helga couldn't stand the thought of Torris being—

And by her own children. Helga's forehead broke out in a sweat. "Wake *up!*" More youngsters were creeping into the room.

"What's up, Henga?" one asked, hanging from a strand upside-down to stare at her.

"What are you doing!" she cried. "Your mother is sick." They whikkered at each other in Numisian West Continental 4. Helga didn't know too much of the native languages yet; it was a good seven-year study just to hear and translate much less to speak.

Another youngster dropped from the ceiling on one of Torris's spread legs, two meters on the other side of the moundhouse. "What's up Henga?" the others asked in unison, swaying. Back and forth. Like hoopies in the pumice holes. More gathered around Torris, who whikkered softly.

"You stay away!" Helga shouted. She ran around her friend, trying to brush the youngsters off, but they were too many, with too many gripping legs. More began to nibble on her.

"God damn you!" She took out her dartgun and flipped aside the hoopie setting. "Get away from her!"

The children began keening and the sound made strange harmonics with the dartgun's whine. They didn't move. She pressed the trigger and fourteen darts fanned out around the moundhouse, pricking fourteen children. They jerked and keened louder, then ran from the moundhouse. Several jumped blindly into the bladder and got drenched with fine sprays.

Helga was in a frenzy. She tore furniture from its anchoring and jammed it up against the strandweave doorhanging, tying it down with more strands. Her fingers were dusty white with the strand adhesive, and she hardly had time to wipe them off before children began coming down the ceiling vent pipes. She punched the rewind button on the dartgun, and the darts zipped back into place on tiny wires—nine of them, anyway. The others had broken off.

"Why shoot at us, Henga?" one youngster asked, holding out its long, skinny legs in supplication.

"You stay out of here!"

It began to keen in NumisCont4 again. "STAY OUT!" Helga screamed. She aimed the gun and the youngster backed up the flue. Then she stuffed Torris's strandweave bedding into the flue. She didn't know how long that would last.

There didn't seem to be any more ways in. The rear doors were always locked from the inside and were seldom used anyway. She sat by Torris and petted her back, gasping for air. She seemed to be in control for the moment.

Then doubts crossed her mind. There were instances where youngsters ate their mothers—even their fathers—in extraterrestrial species, but they had

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never known such a thing to happen among the Numisians. By nature, they were frugivores, fruit-eaters. She was as shocked seeing the children try to eat Torris as she would have been seeing human children behave so.

The sobbing caught up with her just when she thought she was in control of her breathing. She looked around wildly, lungs and throat jerking with emotion, suddenly hating everything heretofore she had loved, suddenly terrified that after Torris, they would go for her, too. Perhap's Torris's illness, in Numisian young, resulted in insanity.

And she had *taught* the youngsters, *played* with them! Her father's paper had emphasized the easy-going relationships possible between young humans and Numisians. Torris, after all, was not much older than Helga. The Numisians matured much faster than humans.

Perhaps it was time for Torris to die. "No," Helga told herself as calmly as possible. "They live to be at least as old as we do. They have seven or eight litters in a lifetime."

The panic doubled back on her. She wished that she had never been to Numis, that her father had been a farmer and not a sociologist with the GASENs.

Or it was all a nightmare, and soon she would wake and find she had drunk too much of Torris's E-rich and otherwise exotic boobfruit nectar.... And they would go off exploring the Lace Forest, or look at the Downside-Up mountains through the telescope Uva had borrowed from the GASENs survey team.

She closed her eyes. She could almost hear the trickle of lace-tree sweat in the dark, shadowy groves. They were among her very favorite places, clean and sweet-smelling. The lace trees periodically let down their branches and swept the soil around them, gathering up their own detritus and compacting it around their roots. When they swept, they sang in low, windy tones, expelling air from their pneumatic muscles. Really, Numis was a magical place—

And magic had its other side. She opened her eyes.

There were voices outside. She recognized her father's and stood up. "Uva!" she called. "I'm in here!"

A youngster drooped through the flue, pushing the bedding strands ahead of it, and landed on Torris. Helga whirled around and picked up a stone tool base, aiming it carefully. Torris half-rose, her square-faceted eyes on a level with Helga's, and held out a leg. Helga dropped the base.

Torris's three-clawed fingers had beseeched. The sign was known to all Numisians—*cease*.

"It is this way," Torris said softly. "It must be. I am sick. Net them come. It is the time."

The strandweave hanging behind Helga parted, and Uva reached in with a gloved hand, grabbing her arm. He

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pulled her from the moundhouse. She hugged him fiercely, trying to tell him what had happened.

The rest of Torris's children were waiting outside. Hans the Jar—whose real name was unpronounceable—ushered them in with thick, stocky male limbs. She knew enough of the languages to tell what he was saying: "Quick, before she gets well!"

"Father, what's happening?" Helga wailed.

"Come on," Uva said, grim-faced.

"She's sick and they're eating her!"

"I know, I know."

A tracked cinder dancer was idling a few meters away. Uva hustled her into the vehicle cab and shut the door behind. Even so, she could see the youngsters flowing into the moundhouse, and hear the cries they made. She tried to cover her ears and eyes.

Hans the Jar came to Uva's side and spoke in broken English. She peered between her fingers and saw the Leg-shaker, watching through the door.

"Torris is very privineged, very," Hans the Jar said. "Such bright ones she winn have, feeding sick, finned with *chekah*." Helga knew what *chekah* was: a nutrient highly sought after by the Numisians, scarce in these times of drought. Her father had been working on the puzzle of *chekah's* role in their social structure. Hans the Jar lapsed back into SouthNumisCont3.

Uva opened the cinder dancer door and stood next to her. "It's almost over," he said.

Helga stared at him fiercely. "She was going to get well. This is crazy."

"Only for us," Uva said slowly, his face ashen. "So many of them got sick all at once, we were caught by surprise. I'm sorry you had to see, Helga."

"Sorry!" The tears were dry now. Her heart felt like a hard stone. "You let them *eat* her!" She could hardly believe the words as they came out.

"They'll eat everybody who gets sick—the children will, that is. Eat their parents. They should be smarter than we are, you know. Numis was civilized once. With the viral *chekah* they'll have a chance again—"

"I don't care," Helga said. She jumped down from the cab and walked past Hans the Jar and the Leg-shaker. It was a crazy, jumble-headed thing she was doing, but she had to. The Leg-shaker stopped her just as she was about to go into the moundhouse. "Torris dead," he said.

She jerked back from him and walked midway between the moundhouse and the cinder dancer. She turned this way and that, nowhere to go, no friends, only craziness.

Then the youngsters came out of the moundhouse in their usual chattering horde. They were smeared with Torris's blood. They saw Helga and clustered around her, shouting in English and German, asking her to play with them, teach them. Helga was frozen with horror and disgust. They drew on her pants with Torris's blood, using their tiny nails to make zigzag

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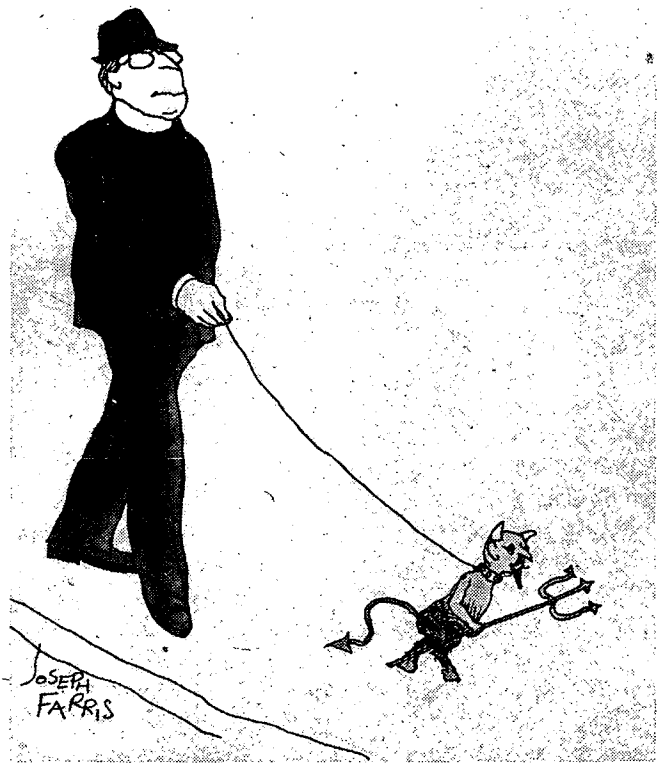
lines. "Play! Teach!" They were frenetic, screeching. Hans the Jar reached out and shooed the youngsters away. They ran to the top of the moundhouse, legs waving, running circles around each other, with more energy than she had ever seen. Helga got down on her knees and held her hands firmly in the blood-spattered dirt. Her mouth was working, but nothing came out.

Uva picked her up in his arms and returned her to the cinder dancer. Hans the Jar shut the door for him. "Winn you come to the cenebration?" he asked Uva.

"Celebration?"

"Of course! When they grow, perhaps we have cities again. Everything better. *Chekah* season hardny ever comes, good for the future."

"I don't think so," he said, patting Helga's head. She lay on the seat beside him, curled up with her hands on the back of her neck, staring at her knees. "My congratulations," he said.



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Pat Cadigan wrote "Second Comings — Reasonable Rates," (February 1981) and returns with a chilling tale about a mother who was not good to her baby girl....

The Coming of the Doll

BY

PAT CADIGAN

I'm not a screamer, but I scream anyway. Once, loud and long, and when nothing happens at the end of it, I scream again, much louder and a good deal longer. And, still, nothing happens, nothing changes. There is still a charming little baby doll lying on its back in Rowena's crib with its butter-soft plastic limbs sticking up in the air and its Cupid's-bow mouth permanently puckered around a small hole meant for a baby-doll bottle. I do not touch the doll; the fingerprints of whoever took Rowena and left it in her place could be on it. I have enough presence of mind to think of that even if I am screaming.

I look at the window. It's open but I opened it myself this morning. If the kidnapper came in that way, he was careful to close the screen behind him when he left. I back out of the room slowly — nice room, decorated bit by bit all the months I was pregnant, pleasant without being icky-sweet — and run down the hall to the stairs.

Someone is banging on the front door, hard, and the doorbell is going mad, bonging so fast it can barely keep up with itself. I hesitate, clutching the rail until I hear Betty Thornton's voice calling over and over, "Sharon, are you all right? Sharon? Sharon?"

She's heard me, I realize. I screamed and she heard me. I run down the stairs, thumping, almost slipping on the carpeting and fetch up against the door. Clumsily, I paw the chain lock off and flip the deadbolt, thinking he could not have come in this way, not through the chain lock and the deadbolt. Then the door is open and Betty's mouth is moving and her eyes are blinking and she shakes me hard, even though I'm not screaming any more.

"Rowena's gone," I tell her. "Some-

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one took her. Someone climbed through her bedroom window and took her."

Betty is all in-charge and calm authority. She has three children, and she knows when to get the Band-Aids and when to call the hospital. "Are you sure?" she says, giving me a final shake to settle everything inside me back where it should be. "Are you sure she didn't just crawl off somewhere?"

"She was having her nap in her crib," I tell her. "She can't crawl well enough, and even if she could, she couldn't get out of her crib without falling, I would have *heard* her!"

This convinces Betty. She pushes me down on the sofa and goes for the telephone. She dials the police from memory — *memory*, she's that kind of mother — and speaks quickly but clearly. When she finishes, she looks toward the stairs and then at me, and decides to stay down here.

"They'll be here right away," she says, sitting down and folding one arm around my shoulders. "You calm down so you can tell them what happened. I'll be right here by you." I ask her what about her own kids, out playing with a child-snatcher loose, and she tells me not to worry, they aren't babies and they won't go with strangers. I worry anyway, thinking the kidnapper must be collecting children, picturing him — yes, *him*, kidnappers have always been *hims* to me — with a large black sack full of dolls. He is exchanging them for children, and now Rowena is at the bottom of the sack, suffocating under a load of squirming arms and legs, all children he has taken and replaced with dolls. Why am I thinking that? Betty dabs at my face with a tissue, and I realize I'm crying tears of fear. Tears of fear, tears of fear, my mind says over and over until the police come in the still-open front door.

I jump up. Betty restrains me from flinging myself at the uniforms. All I really see are the uniforms, deep dark blue with shiny, no-fooling badges. And guns. God bless the guns, they look so beautifully huge. They'll shoot the man with the sack dead, and all the children will come home again. Rowena, too.

It takes both me and Betty to tell them what's wrong. They look from one of us to the other, following the volley of our words back and forth. Then one says, "Bert, you have a look upstairs. Try to stay calm, Mrs. Petersen. Where is your husband?" I tell him I'm divorced as Bert goes up the stairs. I can see by the position of his arm that he has his hand on his gun, even though I've said there is no one up there. "Could her father have taken her?" the policeman asks me. I shake my head. Am I sure? I'm sure. Was there a custody fight? No, no custody fight. I am explaining that I am between jobs and living on savings with Betty interpreting the garbled spots, when Bert comes to the head of the stairs and says, "Dave, you'd better

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have a look at this."

Dave looks up at his partner and sees something very, very bad, something I have not seen, and I grab at Betty until she has to press my hands between hers. Then he looks at me and sees something even worse, and I think that the man with the sack must have dropped Rowena, dropped her out the window and killed her, and they think I did it.

We all go up the stairs, Betty and I following Dave slowly because I can't let go of her. He leads us down the hall to the cheerful-awful room. If Betty were not holding me, I would not be able to go in. But she is being brave for me, and we do go in. Bert is already back in the room, looking not out the window but down into the crib. Dave goes across the room and looks, too. Then they both turn to me and Bert says, "Mrs. Petersen, do you take drugs?"

Betty disengages herself from me and walks to the crib as though the floor were made of eggs. I stand just inside the doorway all alone now, unable to think why they are asking me if I take drugs? Drugs? *Drugs*? What have they found in Rowena's crib that I did not see? All three of them are staring at me and their eyes say they cannot believe themselves. So I go, too, across the room and look down into the crib.

The doll is still there. It hasn't moved, of course. It can't move unless I move it, and I haven't moved it because of the fingerprints.

Betty touches my shoulder the way I have seen her touch her best crystal. "See, Sharon?" she says. "Rowena must have, ah, crawled under the blanket and hid from you." Her eyes are not right, the way they're on me.

Bert — or Dave, suddenly I can no longer tell them apart — lifts the doll's little shirt with a careful finger. The afternoon sun is harsh on the plastic navel-less stomach. "About three months, is that right? She seems well-treated." He sounds dubious, but then he smiles. "Don't want to wake the little beauty. Maybe we'd better go back to the living room and, ah, thrash this out."

The other policeman — marked *Shelton*, I see for the first time, but I still don't know if it's Bert or Dave — is having trouble with his face. His mouth is sliding around and he can't decide whether he should look at me or Betty. Betty's arm slips around my shoulders and grips me firmly. "I think we should call someone first, officer," she says. "Someone to look after the baby while I stay with Sharon."

The baby? "The *baby*?" I say, looking into Betty's face. I can't believe I heard her right, but there is something she finds equally incredible of me. I can tell. Our eyes are mirrors.

Then I jump forward and yank the light summer blanket out of the crib. It's yellow, soft, with little green horses galloping all over it. "Do you see a baby hiding in this blanket?" I demand, shaking it to show there's nothing in it,

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nothing at all. I throw it on the floor and pick up a rattle. "Can a baby hide behind this? Or this?" I am plucking Rowena's toys out of the crib like vermin, a spongy ball, a soft plastic train, a teddy bear, and hurling them to the floor until there is nothing on the mattress but that hideous sweet doll. I grab it up by one leg and hold it out over the floor. "Do you see a baby here?" I shout. "Do you? This is just a doll! It's nothing but a *doll*!"

The silence in the room is horrified. Then the Shelton policeman has his hands under the doll as though it were alive. He looks into my eyes and he says, so quietly, so gently, "Mrs. Petersen, please let go."

I do and now I am the horrified one, because he is holding that thing like a baby, exactly the way you should hold a baby, and its eyes are open. It's an expensive doll with eyes that fall open and closed, and brown curly hair, not just painted on, the kind you can really comb. But it could never be mistaken for a real child and it looks nothing like Rowena. Her hair is dark, yes, but not so curly and her mouth is not a frozen Cupid's-bow. But the Shelton policeman is murmuring to it, and Betty's hands are fluttering around me like pesky birds, and the other policeman is saying, "Mrs. Thornton, do you know Mrs. Petersen well enough to tell if this is her daughter?"

And Betty says—

Oh, God, Betty says — she says—

"Yes, that's Rowena. I've babysat her and I have three of my own. I *know* one child from another and that's Rowena."

I slap her traitorous paws away from me. How can she? How can she? Anyone can see it isn't a child! Anyone but Betty and these two awful policemen.

And then Betty is telling them all kinds of things about me, about how Rowena broke up my marriage because Jeff couldn't stand her getting all my attention and how I lost my job and blamed Rowena and Rowena got sick and I slept through her screaming and I would have gone on sleeping if Betty hadn't come by and Rowena began choking and I didn't know what to do and I use sleeping pills because I can't adjust to the divorce.

"You sneak!" I shout in her face. "You snooped in my medicine cabinet, *how dare you*!"

Betty looks hurt, like I slapped her, but she's the one who slapped me, going through my things, telling the police gossip about me, insisting this plastic thing is Rowena. They all look to each other, and I see they have decided on a common expression to use because their faces are identical when they turn to me again. The Shelton policeman gently transfers the doll they think is Rowena to Betty's arms, and I run out of the room.

I only mean to run into the hall where I won't have to watch this travesty, but the policemen holler in rough

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voices. They scare me so much I run down the stairs faster than before when Betty was pounding and ringing to get in. The police are thundering down the steps after me, and that scares me even more because they are obviously deranged, mistaking a doll for my Rowena. I'm out the screen door with them still chasing me when I realize they are not deranged at all, they are in league with the man with the sack.

And then I really run, pumping my legs for all I'm worth, across the street without looking and between two houses. My chest is burning already, I'm no jogger, but I keep going because if I stop I won't stand a chance of getting Rowena back. They'll force me to accept the doll and treat it like a baby, and I'll never see my daughter again.

Behind the houses is an alleyway where the garbage trucks go to pick up trash. I cut across the unfenced yard on the right, surprising the man standing at the barbecue with a steak speared on a long fork. I see in passing that his little boy is playing in a sandbox, moving trucks and cars around. The man with the sack wouldn't dare try to take that little boy, his father would stab him like a steak with that fork, I just know it. I don't wonder what the father thinks about the policemen chasing me across his yard. I can't think about anything except getting away and the burning that has become a squeezing wildfire in my chest. The alley is cracked and pitted with ice heaves and potholes, but I'm leaping over them and skirting around them. I'm not going to trip and fall. I'd let Rowena down if I tripped, and I'm not going to let her down this time.

At the end of the alley I see the police car pull up and stop. I veer away to the left, and almost before I know it, I leap a fence, hit the grass on my feet and keep running, glad for once all I ever wear are jeans and sneakers, nothing nicer. I pound through the yard, around the house and burst through the front gate. Then across another street, into another yard and down another alley. My knees are beginning to weaken, my thighs are shaky, and there is no oxygen in the great whoops of air I take. But I run, for Rowena I run between the houses and down the sidewalks until the houses aren't even vaguely familiar and the penned dogs in the fenced yards snarl in deadly earnest, smelling the total stranger of me, just the way they would snarl at the man with the sack if he came here. When I finally pound to a stop, my whole body jarred with each slowing step and my chest rising and collapsing like crazy bellows, when I bend over coughing with my trembling hands on my watery knees, no one comes up behind me to say I'm under arrest. I am alone. I have outrun the police. All for Rowena. I see now that it's true that maternal instinct enables a woman to perform superhuman feats. By outrunning the police I have just performed one. Because I am a good mother and

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have the maternal instinct. I could chew through solid steel to get to my child. I could lift ten thousand pounds if my child were under them. I could sprout wings and fly to the moon if my child were stranded there. I would never let her lie for hours in dirty diapers while I slept knocked-out on sleeping pills. A doll perhaps, but not Rowena.

I look around as my breath comes back, but there are still no police in sight. It is a miracle that they don't know where I am. I'm standing on the sidewalk of a street not very unlike my own. I wonder if the babies on this street will grow up to go to school with Rowena after I get her back. Across from me is the edge of the park, where older children go to play on the swings and the seesaws and hang upside-down on the jungle gym, or just run around on the grass or climb on the picnic tables. The man with the sack would love to come here and carry off unattended children, leaving dolls lying on the ground for their grieving mothers to find later. It occurs to me he is there now, wandering through the park with his sack. I will find him and grab that sack away from him and wrestle Rowena out of it. Then I'll run home and show them, all of them, the policemen and that gossipy Betty Thornton and the man with the fork, that my Rowena couldn't possibly be that doll.

I go quickly across the street and into the park, down a grassy slope to the picnic table area. The swings and seesaws and jungle gym are further on. I can hear the children playing on them. I'm heading straight for the voices when I see the woman sitting reading at the picnic table with the doll standing nearby.

I can't help it. I have to stop when I see the doll. It's three feet high and its skin is too pink to be real, its cheeks too plump, the golden banana curls too perfect. Yes. I recognize it now, from when I was a little girl. It's a Shirley Temple doll, left there by the man with the sack. He has exchanged it for the real little girl while her mother was reading, and the real little girl is now in the sack with Rowena and the other children. And then I realize that this doll he has left is *my* doll, *mine*.

I take a step toward it. The woman closes her book with a snap and stands up. "Time to go home, Denice. Daddy'll be home any time now and he wants his supper when he wants it."

The doll just stands. Of course it doesn't answer. It just smiles and holds its arms out as though it were a real little girl who wanted a hug. But it isn't. The woman doesn't seem to know this.

"Don't one-more-minute me, we've been out here for hours, let's go!" She grabs the doll's arm and begins dragging it away across the grass. The doll bumps along clumsily and after a few steps the woman stops. "Pick up your feet, can't you? You're wearing down your shoes and they cost a goddamn fortune!" She gives the doll an angry yank. I put my hands over my face and

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turn away. This is too horrible. The woman doesn't know her little girl is gone. She has no maternal instinct, not like me.

I force myself to walk in the other direction. It's too late for her. If I find her little girl when I get Rowena back from that awful man with the sack, I will keep her myself. I'll tell the police she's my niece or my cousin. I won't let them take her; they don't know the difference between a real girl and a doll, either.

Almost to the swings, I stop again. There is a little girl, a *real* little girl sitting on the grass, playing with a doll. I have to rub my eyes because the afternoon light makes the doll almost — *almost*, not quite — look like a baby. But it's stiff, with straight blonde hair that is obviously fake, like a bad wig. The little girl is holding it and talking to it as though it were a baby, the way little girls play. I think, how sweet, and then, no, *no*. Little girls shouldn't play just with dolls. They should have other toys so they won't be stereotyped, so they won't be fooled into thinking they have the maternal instinct if they really don't have it. When I get Rowena back I'll let her have only one doll. Just one. So she won't get fooled, like—

The little girl suddenly holds the doll up and says, "Alice Ann, you're a bad, bad girl!" And then for *no reason* she lays the doll across her lap and spanks her!

I rush over. "Stop it! What has she done for you to punish her this way?"

The girl looks up at me. She is a solemn little thing of eight or nine. I hope Rowena will be much happier when she's that age and not spank the one doll I give her.

"Who're you?" the girl asks. Her hand still hovers over that poor, no, plastic bottom. I squat down and pick the doll out of her lap, straightening its clothes and stroking its hair. It's a very pretty doll, though nowhere near as pretty as Rowena. Not even as pretty as the doll that the man with the sack left in its, *her* place. This doll has only painted eyes that stay open even during naptime. Painted eyelashes, too, and raggedy hair. But it's pretty because it's a baby. A baby doll.

"I'm a mommy," I tell the girl. "A real mommy with a real baby."

"Where is it?"

"*She*. She's — " I could almost choke this brutal little brat, but then I see she's not really unkind, just thoughtless. She lacks the maternal instinct. Her little face is innocent. "She's not with me right now. I'm on my way to get her. You should treat your baby much gentler. She's only a little tiny girl and she can't take spankings yet." When I get Rowena back, I'll never spank her unless she's really, *really* bad. That's not going to be till she's much older, naturally.

The girl takes the doll away from me and holds her possessively. Holds her all wrong, too. "Not like that," I say. "You'll hurt her. Hold her like this, with your arm supporting her lit-

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tle head. There. That's right. Make a cradle of your arms." The girl is watching me with suspicion, but I don't care. They're all suspicious at that age. Except I hope Rowena won't be. "You know, a terrible thing can happen if you don't treat your baby right."

"Like what?" she challenges. She doesn't believe me.

"Well," I say, being patient as all good mothers are, "my mother told me a long time ago that if I wasn't a good girl, a man with a great big black sack would come and he'd put me in the sack and in my place he'd leave a—" No. That isn't right. I know it isn't because I'm not in the sack. "If you're not good to your little girl," I begin again more confidently, "a man with a great big black sack will come and take your baby away and he'll leave a doll in her place. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

The girl looks down at the doll and up at me again. "But Alice Ann *is* a doll. She's not a real baby."

"In that case, you'd better be extra good to her," I warn, "or the man with the sack will come and he'll take the doll and leave a real baby behind. And real babies are an awful lot of trouble to take care of, much more trouble than dolls. Do you know any lullabies?"

She only knows "Rockabye Baby." We are halfway through our third time singing it when the police finally catch up with me.

* * *

It has taken a lot of fast talking, but they haven't locked me up. I could tell they didn't really want to as we rode back to my house in the patrol car. The police are very busy and don't lock someone up just because she has the maternal instinct. That isn't a crime. I didn't tell them about the man with the sack, though, and I guess that is a crime, but they'd never find him anyway. Only mothers can find him, mothers who really have the maternal instinct, and babies.

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When we came home, I went straight into the house and found Betty sitting in the living room in my rocking chair, rocking the doll. The sight of her with it in her arms made me so tired. I didn't argue with her. I just took the doll from her and held it exactly the way she did. Then *I* sat down in the rocking chair and *I* rocked the doll. Betty talked to the policemen for a long time, but I didn't pay any attention. I just stared at the doll, moving it up and down so its eyes opened and closed more like a real child's would. The policemen finally went away but Betty stayed. She called her husband and then she sat down on the couch and watched me. She's still sitting there and she's still watching me, but not as closely as she was. She keeps looking at the electric clock on the TV set, like she's waiting. Well, I'm waiting, too. The front door is still open and the daylight is fading through the screen. After Betty leaves, I'm going to let the front door stay open like that, with the screen door unlocked. I have an idea.

If I'm very, very good to this doll and demonstrate that I really do have the maternal instinct by changing her diapers right away and not sleeping through her crying, the man with the sack might come back and return Rowena. It's a chance. I could have been wrong, back there in the park. Maybe if you're good to your doll, the man with sack comes and gives you a real baby. Maybe he'll come this evening. I'm going to expect him. Betty acts like she's expecting someone herself. Couldn't be him, though. Betty's always had the maternal instinct. It's inevitable after three kids, I bet.

But I've had only Rowena, and I didn't have her very long. Nonetheless, I know I have the maternal instinct, too. I'll prove it with the doll.

And yet, that could be a problem, I think to myself, moving the doll up and down. The eyes open and close. Open and close. Click-click. Click-click. Dolls never cry. How will I know when she's hungry? How will she tell me?

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A short and surprising tale in which two men make a final, desparate stab at exploring the surface of the Moon.

It Isn't Love That Makes the World Go 'Round

BY

REG BRETNOR

Joel Gilfillan brought the news to me, making his way through the long underground passages of Moon Station to the office/lab where I was still pretending our project was alive and well; and the look on his long face told the whole story.

"St. Nick got in?" I said.

Gilfillan nodded, almost weeping. 'By a landslide," he whispered, his Adam's-apple working up and down. 'The bastard! The Earth-sucking s.o.b.!"

We stared at each other silently. There'd been three hundred and twenty-six of us when Senator Dominick Santa received his first Proxmire Memorial Award; two years later, when he got his second, only ninety-one were left; in 1996, when he was honored for the third time and nominated for the Presidency, our number had dropped abruptly to less than thirty — and we were caretakers only, one or two capon colonels like myself, the rest straight civilian engineers, scientists, technicians.

And now the crazy propaganda of

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the Mother Earthers had swept Nick Santa into the nation's highest office. (What did we need with Space? With a dead, airless world? Why waste resources that could nourish Mother Earth and feed her children? How better could we ensure our well-being and prosperity? The Soviet Union no longer was a threat, tangled in failing agriculture, limping technology, feuds, Party heresies, ethnic and religious dissidence — to say nothing of the Chinese. The Third World was bleeding itself to death by overpopulation. And hadn't American Enterprise come up with all the answers to our problems, miraculous new synthetics, chemicals, fertilizers, splendid hybrids of our Earth-given animals and vegetables? "No, no my friends, the rich breasts of Mother Earth will *not* run dry! Look how we are harvesting the limitless jungles with our Brazilian friends! Look how we and our Canadian and Icelandic allies have developed North Atlantic codfish farming! Consider the bottomless new oilfields under the deep seas and the polar icecaps!" And so on.)

Gilfillan had been on the Moon three years, sent up originally to explore its surface — and immediately forbidden to. The Moon is big — six thousand miles around — and it won't let you fly because there's no air. We had been issued only one rocket-hopper, "for emergencies," and our battery-powered buggies didn't have the range. Besides, the official line kept harping on "the high risks and profitless expense" of surface exploration. So Gilfillan spent three years poring over old photos, making sharply restricted buggy-runs out from the limits of the station, writing futile reports and making futile suggestions, or arguing and pleading and watching the project's slow political assassination.

I pitied him, but I was still station commandant; it was my duty to whistle in the dark.

"Well, he can't do much more to us," I remarked. "Now he's in, maybe he'll let up. Who knows?"

Gilfillan stared at me wretchedly. He ran bony fingers through his thin red hair. "C-can't do much more to us?" he almost sobbed. "My God, Tanner, he's gone and *done* it!"

Something told me it was time to quit whistling. "He — he's done *what*?"

"I — I listened to him when he heard he was elected. A newsman asked him what his first act as President would be. He said, 'Close down that lousy money-waster on the Moon! Another newsman asked if he meant mothball it, and he said, 'I mean kill it. Now. Abandon it. And you can quote me — from now on it's as dead as the damn Moon itself!'".

I tried to soothe him. "It'll be a while before he actually takes over."

Gilfillan shook his head. "After *his* win? No way. Right now all he has to do is say 'dead dog' and they'll roll over."

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Right on cue, then, my desk board beeped at me; its screen lit up, telling me to unscramble.

"Want to bet it's Mother?" Gilfillan muttered bitterly.

I pushed the *clear* button, and the screen came to life. "Malcolm Tanner here," I said, recognizing Antonelli of Space Central.

He nodded at me soberly. "You've heard?"

"About the election? Yes, just now."

Behind me, I heard Gilfillan clear his throat and mumble something about "See you later...." I motioned him to stay.

Antonelli shook his heavy head. "Malcolm, that's not all. Things are moving fast. I — I'm sorry, Malcolm. Word's just come down. It's abandon ship. All hands, personal possessions only, and a five-day deadline. They'll shuttle you to the I-5 Orbiter, and then to Mama Earth."

I didn't say a word. I couldn't. Even though I'd been expecting something of the sort, I thought they'd at least give us time to prepare.

"Chin up," Antonelli growled sympathetically. "That was unofficial, but you'll be getting formal word in a few hours. Go ahead and tell your people." He paused. "I reckon we'll be next," he said. "Space Central out."

The screen went dead. I turned around. Gilfillan and I stared at each other, and there was a lump I couldn't swallow in my throat.

Finally I said, "Now I know how Chicken Little felt when he thought the sky was falling down." And it wasn't a bit funny.

For a moment, Gilfillan said nothing. He simply stood there twisting his big hands. Then, almost inaudibly, he said, "Chief — Malcolm — there's — there's one big favor I'm going to ask. Just one before the whole thing's washed out. It — It's important to me — more important than — than anything."

"If it's in my power, Joel—" I gave him a sick grin. "—though I don't have a hell of a lot of power left."

"You're still commandant. You — you will be for five days. Malcolm, I want to use the rocket-hopper. Just once." The words began to tumble out of him. He was begging now, almost hysterically. "Malcolm, you know there's one place on the Moon I've *got* to see. Just one, Malcolm! It'll take a couple of hours in the hopper, that's all! It'll—"

Then I recalled Joel Gilfillan's big fixation. He had brought a book up with him from Earth, a book published back in the '70s when the world was all excited about Space. It was based on NASA photographs of the lunar landscape. Its title was *Somebody Else Is on the Moon*. Everybody laughed at Gilfillan for it. Sensationalism. Nut stuff. I wasn't sure — some of the photographs and drawings made from them had been impressive. But I had had to take our experts' word for it. I

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knew it was what Gilfillan had in mind.

"Just Lubinicky A, Malcolm!" he pleaded. "Just that one crater. That's where you can see the — the machines most clearly, Malcolm! It's something we've just got to *know*! And this could be our last chance — the way things are going, *man's* last chance!"

I glanced down at my desk. On it there was a letter from my brother, also a geophysicist, working on the great South Polar oilfields, The fac had just spewed it out that morning. It told me what a goddamn fool I was to mess around in Space (and on the hopeless Moon, for God's sake!) when I could be there on Mother Earth making twenty times as much and building a career for myself. I looked at it, and at Gilfillan. My sympathy was all with him.

Why the hell not? I thought. *Who'll get hurt if we do take a look over there? And maybe when we find out there's nothing, we'll both feel better about leaving all this behind.* I hesitated. "You're not a hopper pilot, are you?"

"No," he answered, "but *you* are. We can go together."

I thought, *St. Nick'll probably skin my ass for this.*

I said, "How soon can you be ready?"

Working short-handed, it took almost three hours for the technicians to prepare the hopper, program it for the jump to the Bulliadus area, where Lubinicky A is located, and get it to its domed launching pad. I had passed the word that Moon Station was doomed. So almost no one paid attention to what we were up to. They were mostly standing in tight, small knots in the general hall, trying to absorb the impact and getting set for what was obviously going to be a rip-roaring wake.

We suited up and went out through the airlock into vacuum. The hopper was standing there in the earthlight on its four landing legs, ladder extruded. We climbed up, strapped in, went through the preliminary routines. When everything was battened down and every instrument on the control panel said GO, I pushed the big red button. Seconds later, the Moon's gray surface — that scarred and naked complexity of mysteries which we had never really known — was receding swiftly, tilting crazily beneath us, pulling us with its feeble gravity.

It wasn't a long flight, as such things go — a bit more than fifteen hundred kilometers (though I never have figured out why they chose to put Moon Station even that far from the 10-ring, the Moon's dead center, near where Armstrong had taken that first tiny and gigantic step that had held out so much false promise for mankind).

Our landing required a minimum of manual aid. I let the hopper hover on its retro-jets, seeking a level spot not too far down the outside eastern slope of Lubinicky A. Almost at once I

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found one. Gently, we set down, moondust spurting under us. I turned up the suit's intercom and heard Gilfillan's heavy breathing. I had not even tried to see into the twenty-kilometer-wide crater as we came down; I had been too busy with the instruments and with seat-of-the-pants piloting. But I had the sudden feeling that Gilfillan had seen *something* — or thought he had.

"For Christ's sake!" he almost screamed the instant we were down. "Let's get *going*!"

I pushed buttons, switches: door, ladder, recorders, power stand-by. I gestured to Gilfillan to go ahead, and he almost tumbled out. For a moment, we stood there, in the Moon's merciless lights and shadows. "What do you really expect to find?" I asked.

"Machinery! That's what the NASA photos show. Machines so big they're unbelievable." He pointed at the crater's rim. "Machines doing things. Come on! Let's *go*!"

We climbed. Even in that light gravity, it wasn't easy. The dust sucked at our feet. Jagged rocks and boulders kept trying to trip us up, forcing us to stagger round them. And the rim was wider than we had expected. Gilfillan headed for its highest point, a point he knew would give us a panoramic view of the entire pit.

I caught up with him just as he halted at that highest point. Without a word, he pointed, letting his arm describe an arc that took in the entire scene.

I looked at it.

What do you say when you behold the utterly incredible? When you see before you what you *know* to be impossible?

"*Look!*" cried Gilfillan — and it was a cry not so much of awe as of triumph.

On the crater's floor, a giant gear lay, badly broken, its vast teeth tilted at an angle, its immense spindle, worn and pitted, pointed at the sky. I do not think that it was metal. Only slightly darker than the material of the Moon, its substance looked like some unknown and unimaginable ceramic.

A *giant* gear? It was a gear huge enough to crush Manhattan into dust. Unbroken, it had been five kilometers across. Near it lay the enormous fragments of another gear, even more badly shattered. And there were other bits and pieces of what had once been a mechanism — a mechanism produced by an incredible technology for purposes of which we could not dream.

Or could we? Somehow, it did not seem all alien. Somehow, the entire array was hauntingly, intimately, frighteningly familiar. And here and there around its edges I could see small movements, a suddenly protruded and retracted jagged end, a twitching fragment of a spiral something. They moved like the last feeble, insensate scratchings of an enormous, dying insect.

And all of them looked worn — worn out completely. Worn out and vomited out from far below the surface

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in the machine's last agonies, to twitch interminably in the Moon's terrible alternations of heat and cold, of savage day and icy darkness.

Abruptly, then, I knew why they were so familiar. I remembered a day when I was nine, and very much mechanically inclined, and I'd decided that I could take my grandfather's old key-winding heirloom pocket watch apart and put it back together — and Dad had come in just after I pulled out and ruined the escapement. He had made sure that I never would forget its broken gears and pinions, its distorted springs. It had always been a painful memory — now it was a shattering one.

I wanted to sit down, and my suit would not allow it. Gilfillan's voice filled my helmet. "You're the geophysicist, friend Malcolm — tell me, what is it makes the world go 'round?"

The stock answer came into my head and went no further. I could not utter it.

"Maybe we don't know all there is to know about the laws of physics, how about *that*, Malcolm? Maybe it does take something we don't know about to keep worlds spinning? And why is it that the Moon *doesn't* spin? Why is its one face frozen here in Space, always staring at the turning world?" He paused. Once more he pointed. "What's all that down there? You tell me, Malcolm!"

I thought of everything I'd learned. I thought about my dissertation, about the facts of physics, the laws universally accepted. I said, "Don't make me say it, Joel."

"Tell me!"

I barely breathed the words. "It — it's *clockwork*."

We stood there for an eternity, Gilfillan busying himself with his camera, using his telephoto lenses. We both searched the far reaches of Lubinicky A. There were more fragments there.

That was not all. There were also structures. Some were overturned. Others had been smashed by meteorites or lunar avalanches. Others remained standing. Their design was alien, but their purpose was all too familiar.

They were oil derricks, somewhat larger than those we used on Earth, those with which my brother was making his reputation and his fortune in Antarctica, but they were unmistakable.

Gilfillan stared at me. "What do you think St. Nick is going to say about all this?" he asked, and there was apprehension in his voice.

"Knowing how he operates, he and the people with him, I think we'd better talk things over very carefully before we say a word."

We started back in silence, stumbling back down the crater's slope, back to the hopper, back to the known, where all the laws worked just as we said they should.

We climbed aboard, prepared for take-off.

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"*Somebody* must've built those ıings," Gilfillan said. "*Somebody* ıust have planned a way to keep them oing."

"Yes," I answered. It seemed quite nough. I pushed the big red button; nd, as the hopper rose, I saw myself own with my brother, sucking fother Earth, making my fortune, en-ıring my career — and always waiting.

Waiting for the Big Man with the ey.

Note:

Readers who wish to examine 72-H-1387 and other NASA photographs on which this little fantasy was based, together with associated drawings and analyses, can consult Somebody Else Is on the Moon, *by George H. Leonard, New York, David McKay Company, Inc., 1976.*

—R.B.

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Gordon Eklund's new story is about a man, woman and robot who arrive on the planet Farovene to build a new world and encounter terrors unnoticed by the exploration team that preceded them.

Transubstantiation

BY

GORDON EKLUND

Newly married, they made a most compatible couple, which was no quirk of fate, since the grand computer on old Earth had deliberately chosen their names for just that reason, their perfect genetic match. What was far more astonishing was the fact that they were also deeply in love. He was Marc Slatter, tall, broad-shouldered, red-bearded, while she, Nara, was blonde, delicate, almost frail. A pair of old-style rimless spectacles made her eyes seem extraordinarily large in her face, but if in superficial ways Marc and Nara clashed, within, where it mattered, they complemented each other well.

They had come by one-way ship to Farovene, fourth planet of a G-type sun, to build a new world. Previously passed over in favor of more obviously lush and fertile planets, Farovene had now been deeded in whole and perpetuity to Marc, Nara, and their eventual descendants. He was Farovene's Adam and she its Eve, but after two centuries of colonial expansion this was no longer an uncommon tale among the former denizens of Earth. The T-team report had made note of only one major environmental deficiency: the winters on Farovene appeared to be both long and harsh, even in the equatorial regions.

They arrived in autumn. Marc stepped outside the ship and gazed at the pale afternoon sky, where the disc of a single big moon showed plainly. Nara joined him and linked hands. "I like it here," she said.

"Me too." They had landed in a forested region. a narrow creek ran near their feet. In the distance, white-capped peaks stood like the clenched fingers of a god. "We'll need shelter for the night," he said.

"Not the ship?"

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"No." He was definite. "I want land underneath me tonight."

"Our home."

"Yes."

He led her away from the ship. They forded the creek. The hot exhaust of the ship had cleared only a small portion of the forest. The trees were evergreen. Needles blanketed the ground. There were many big gnarled cones. It was truly another world under here, a hushed place, where men tiptoed. "That large lake we spotted on the way down," said Marc. "I think it's this way."

"Why do you want to know?"

"I thought a swim would be refreshing."

"You must be crazy. I'm freezing already." She shivered for effect.

"You're just not used to the outdoors."

"Are you?"

"No, but I want to be."

She took hold of his arm, understanding. "What about our shelter?"

"I've already instructed Xar. By the time we get back, he'll have it done."

Xar was their robot, a Castillian android. Identical to a human in flesh and form, Xar resembled a tall, pale, hairless man. Those most knowledgable claimed that the eyes always revealed the truth. "A robot is dead inside. Build one as good as it can be done, but they won't have feelings or emotions. The eyes give it away."

While Marc and Nara swam in the chilly water of thelake, Xar emerged from the ship and commenced work. He cleared a patch of land, felled several trees, cut logs, and began to build. The forest echoed with the sounds of his labors. The cabin, when finished, was necessarily modest, containing only a single large room. There wasn't time to make a floor or finish the roof. Using stones dredged from the creek bed, Xar built a fireplace in one corner of the cabin and let the chimney climb through a gap in the moss roof. When he was done, he stood in front of the cabin, arms crossed, and waited patiently for the return of his master and mistress.

Presently, Marc and Nara emerged from the forest, their hair wet and clinging to their skulls. When they saw the cabin, they stopped and stared. Nara, with a delighted squeal, was the first to break the silence. She ran excitedly up to Xar and embraced him impulsively. "You've done a wonderful, wonderful job," she said.

Perhaps he had. Compliments meant nothing to him. Born devoid of emotions, pride was as alien to his nature as greed or envy. His memory of the past was vague. Created more than a century ago, he had spent the intervening years serving many masters on many worlds. If at any time he had suffered a major debilitating injury — the loss of an arm or eye — he would have been sent unhesitantly to the furnaces. Marc and Nara had purchased him at an auction on Capstone, the funds supplied by Colonial Central on Earth. It

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was an established fact that the probability of survival of a progenitor couple was radically improved by the presence of a robot.

Marc and Nara spent the night bundled in blankets on the bare floor of the cabin. Xar tended the fire. Day and night were somewhat longer on Farovene than Earth, but Xar, who had known many planets, easily adjusted his time sense accordingly.

In the morning, while Marc and Nara went for another swim, Xar unloaded the ship of essential cargo. The ship carried sufficient concentrates for their immediate needs, but winter would soon be coming and no crops could be planted until spring. Before then, a first child would likely have been conceived. Marc and Nara were expected to produce nine offspring, three sons and six daughters. A girl would be first.

Weeks passed. Marc and Nara learned to gather wild fruit, collect water, and go hunting. They had brought several old-fashioned gunpowder rifles with them, but all of them soon jammed. It was a phenomenon of the local atmosphere, rapid oxidation. Xar taught Marc and Nara how to make and use bows and arrows. Fortunately, the forest region was rife with native wildlife. One particular species the size and shape of a fat hog made especially good eating. Oddly, the T-team report on Farovene had failed to mention this creature. Xar killed the first and ate a slab of the rump. When after a day he showed no signs of illness, Marc and Nara ate too. Marc was angered by the apparent deficiences in the T-team report. "I'd be willing to wager the bastards landed way over on the other side of the planet, poked around for a day or two, collected whatever samples were at hand, then let the ship's computer project a complete planetary ecology."

Xar nodded. He had heard of such things happening before. Too many T-team explorers were interested only in the profits to be made from acquiring precious mineral rights.

Marc and Nara never lost their love. This was not something any computer could have predicted. As often as not, the isolation and loneliness of the first months on a new world transformed lovers into haters, but the intensity of feeling shared by Marc and Nara never lessened. They were happy with each other's company. Once, the two of them hiked clear to the base of the mountains to the east. Another time, they crossed the large lake in a raft built by Xar. While they were gone, Xar finished work on the cabin. He secured the walls, using mud and clay, put in a wooden floor, and built a strong roof overhead. He added a second room at the back of the cabin and filled it with their remaining concentrates, fresh water, and as much fruit and wild vegetables as they had gathered.

Three days after Marc and Nara returned from their journey across the lake, winter arrived. The first storm

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truck without warning, a black cloud wooping down from the high mountains. One day the sun beamed in the ky like a yellow eye, and the next now fell in great cascading waves of vhitness. Despite their advance preprations, the suddenness of the storm aught them by surprise. Marc visited he storeroom and emerged rubbing his hin. "We ought to have more wood or the fireplace. There's no telling how ong the storm may last."

"Xar can go," said Nara, who lay eneath a bundle of furs, a book in her ands. She often read to herself. Xar ad never seen an old-fashioned cloth-ound book before, but Colonial Cenral judged them most practical for edcational purposes on new worlds.

"I'll go too," said Marc. "It'll be aster that way. Even Xar gets cold. sn't that right, Xar?"

"Yes, Marc," he agreed, though it vasn't necessarily true. Xar could ense physical discomfort as well as nyone, but it meant nothing to him. Vithout feelings, there could be no eal pain.

Marc got the ax.

The howling wind played a terrible ymphony. Windows rattled and walls hook. "Please be careful," said Nara.

Marc winked, swung the ax over is shoulder, hurled open the door, nd went out. Xar started to follow. Ie had placed only one foot beyond he threshold when he realized how utile it was to go on. With the storm ad come the beasts. They had caught Marc and torn him literally apart.

Xar lunged backward. He caught the door in both hands and slammed it shut.

Nara stared at him. "Xar, what is it?"

He told her that Marc had been killed.

Later, Xar deduced what must have occurred. As Marc had suspected, the T-team report on Farovene was deficient. These beasts were clearly creatures who hibernated during the warm months and emerged with the winter. Xar had previously noted the presence of numberous caves scattered through the forest region and now regretted that he had failed to examine them thoroughly. The beasts, from what he had seen of them, were four-legged, white-furred, red-eyed carnivores closely resembling polar bears, only leaner and quicker. There appeared to be as many as thirty gathered around the front door.

Xar took what little wood remained in the storeroom and boarded-up the doors and windows. Nara, who had been weeping softly, wiped her eyes and said, with difficulty, "Why are you doing that, Xar?"

"They may try to break in."

"Don't you think they'll go away now that ... that they're finished?"

"They saw me. I'm sure they can smell us. Something brought them here in the first place. They'll still be hungry."

"But they won't stay out there for-

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ever — not all winter."

"I hope not."

"How much food and water do we have?"

"Sufficient water. If necessary, I can poke a small hole in the roof and drain the snow. The food won't last more than three months. We'll have to eat very carefully. Fortunately, I don't require a great deal of food."

"Why?"

"It's a matter of cellular replacement."

"But you do have to eat and drink?"

"I do."

She thought about what he had told her. "The T-team report stated that winter lasts six Earth months on Farovene. Do you think that's accurate?"

"Yes. The ship's computer would have projected the figure automatically from the planet's axial tilt and length of rotation."

"And our food will only last three months?"

"At the most."

She put on a smile. "In that case I suppose we'll just have to hope that the beasts give up soon and go away."

But they did not. At least twice each day Xar peered through a narrow gap he had left in one boarded-up window, and the beasts were always there, although at times he had to squint to discern them clearly through the white haze of a storm.

The night following the death of Marc, Nara lay awake until well past dawn. After that, she referred to him only when necessary and without emotion. On the second night, she suggested that Xar lie with her under the bed of furs. Although he was designed to go many weeks without sleep, he consented, aware that without a fire she must be very cold. That night they lay close together. The heat of his body merged with hers and warmed them both. The following night she drew closer and touched him with her body. The third night she put her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist.

During the daylight hours, Nara often read. Fortunately, Xar had unloaded most of the library prior to the arrival of the beasts. Even then, Nara read some books again and again. The light in the cabin was not good — Xar preferred to conserve the candles for night — and he worried about her vision. When he expressed his concern, she laughed and said he reminded her of her mother. "She was always telling me not to read so much. She said it would damage my eyes. She said it was better to let the terminal recite, but I could always read so much faster."

"She may have been right. With the windows boarded-up and the storms, it's too dark to read in here all day."

"I'm going to do it anyway," she said, with a defiant tilt of the head.

He showed his disappointment. "You shouldn't."

She looked at him carefully. "Does

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it matter? If the beasts don't go away, does anything matter?"

Sometimes she described the plots of the books she read. Most dealt with old Earth in the centuries before humanity seriously dreamed of traveling beyond the boundaries of its own planet. Xar knew nothing of human history. He listened with feigned interest and grunted his acknowledgments. One day Nara asked him whether robots ever made up stories. "I tried to be a writer when I was young, but whenever I started a story it never came out of the terminal the way it had sounded in my mind."

"We can't do that," he said truthfully.

She looked surprised. "Why?"

"The creation of art requires emotions. Robots do not possess feelings. We know only that which we can see, smell, touch, hear, or taste. We cannot conceive of places beyond our own experience."

"You have feelings."

"No robot can. It's an impossibility."

"Why? Your body is the same as a man's. Why shouldn't you have feelings? What's preventing you?"

Her argument made him pause momentarily. It was a viewpoint he had not previously considered. "We are not human," he said.

Her health also worried him. For several weeks she was sick every morning and afterward ate sparingly. He limited his own intake to a few concentrates every fourth or fifth day. When he lay with her at night, her body touching his beneath the thin sleeping garment she wore, he could feel the bones of her ribs, thighs, and hips.

One day he told her: "You must begin to eat more."

She didn't deny the meagerness of her intake. "I've been trying to make it last longer."

"It cannot. I have calculated again and again, and the food will not last the entire winter. It is best to eat decently now and reamin healthy as long as possible."

"What if the beasts are still there when the food runs out?"

"Then we will have to consider other options. From now on, I will dole out a nutritional supply of food each morning and evening. You must consume all that I give you in order to remain healthy."

She gazed at him, eyes large behind the lenses of her spectacles, and then suddenly laughed. She laughed so hard that tears came to her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She turned on her stomach.

Xar placed a hand on her shoulders. "What is wrong, Nara?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Are you ill?"

She turned back over and looked at him. Her eyes were red and her face streaked, where the tears had run down. "I'm perfectly fine. I just wanted — wanted to thank you, Xar."

He felt bewildered. "For what?"

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"For — for everything."

Later in the day she confessed that she was pregnant. He believed that he ought to have known long before and cursed his own ignorance. To be certain, he conducted the prearranged tests and determined that she was a full three months along. The baby would be born a girl shortly after the beginning of spring.

"You should have told me," he said. "This means that you must now eat for two, not one."

He increased her food supply and made certain she ate all he gave her. Each day when he looked through the crack in the window, he saw the beasts. He knew these couldn't be the same ones who had killed Marc. Obviously, some must have left to forage, and others had come to take their places. He guessed that the beasts were driven by instinctual needs. Because of the scarcity of game in winter, their lives were dominated by the need for food. Their olfactory senses would be powerful. Perhaps they could not leave even if they wished. They were driven to wait and lay siege.

Two months after Marc's death, Nara put her arms around Xar one night and said, "I almost think I've fallen in love with you."

He was incredulous. "You're delirious. I'm a robot, devoid of feelings. How can you, a woman, possibly love me?"

"Because you're wrong. You do have feelings, Xar. You cared for me when I was sick, and for a time when I would rather have died than lived, you helped me to go one. You offered me a reason for living."

"I cannot return your love."

"Then why have you helped me?"

"Duty."

"I don't believe you."

"I cannot .... "

She put a hand on his lips. "It doesn't matter. I know what I feel and wanted you to know."

"But — "

"I'm going to die. Those beasts will never leave. So please don't worry. Let me feel the way I want to."

Later, after she slept, he slid quietly from under the furs and went to the window and peered through the gap. In the light of the large moon, he observed the beasts. The sky for a change was clear. Stars shined. The eyes of the waiting beasts glowed like tiny hot fires.

He went to a corner of the cabin and sat with his back to the room. He put his head in his hands and attempted to concentrate. Love. Nara had said that she loved him. The complexity of such an emotion left him feeling adrift. What was love? Even Nara had admitted that she wasn't sure. How could she, a woman, possess such a feeling for him, a machine? No, no, he thought. It didn't make sense. She was ill. She must be made to eat more. Tomorrow, in the morning, he would —

She screamed. Her voice cut through his thoughts like the blade of a sword.

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He rushed to her side. "Nara, what is it?"

"The baby," she cried, gasping. "The baby is coming."

The child was born an hour later. Dead. Xar ordered Nara to sleep and gave her a drug. He held the misshapen lump of the dead embryo in the palm of a hand. There was no clean way to dispose of it. He didn't want the beasts to have it. Finally, as Nara slept, he did the only possible thing. He pried loose a board from the floor, placed it in the fireplace, and set it afire. He laid the embryo carefully in the flames. It burned briefly, exuding a pungent odor. His chest suddenly ached. It was difficult to breathe. When he made himself look away, Nara was watching him. "I'm sorry," he told her.

She shook her head, thinking he had meant the fire. "I understand. You had to do it that way."

"I meant the child. It shouldn't have died. Given your genetic make-up — and Marc's — the chances of a miscarriage were minimal. If I had cared for you with more diligence ...."

"I caused it." She drew back the furs and showed him the empty jar of pills clutched in her fist. "I took all of these. I found them in the storeroom with the other drugs. They were for use in the event of an emergency."

"But, Nara, why?"

"Because of the food. There wasn't enough — not for three. You hadn't eaten a bite since I first told you about the baby. You would have starved yourself to death, Xar. Now there's enough."

"But the baby — "

"It wasn't alive. If one of us had to die, it had to be her — it."

She broke down and started to cry. He went to her and put his arms around her and let her head lean against him. Her tears ran down his chest. He had never felt tears before and had somehow imagined them to have a peculiar, more acidic feel. These were like raindrops.

Another month went by and their food supply was nearly exhausted. Outside, the beasts prowled endlessly. Nara looked up at Xar and said, "There's no use prolonging the inevitable."

He nodded. "I agree but there's another way."

"What?"

"I could end my own life. There are many readily available methods and, as a robot, pain would present no obstacle. I think it might be possible for me simply to hold my breath until the end came."

She shook her head solemnly. "Your life isn't the problem, Xar. You hardly eat a thing. I'm what's wrong."

"If I were dead, you would have more to eat. I .... " He hesitated before going on. "My flesh is as nutritious as any concentrate. You could survive that way."

He had expected her to react with initial disgust. "I couldn't do that, Xar. Not ever."

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"Even to live?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't be right."

"Because of the cultural taboo against cannibalism? I've considered that and believe that it doesn't apply in this instance. Since I'm a robot and—"

"It has nothing to do with that."

He assumed she was not telling the truth and argued accordingly, attempting to convince her that the solution he had offered was the only sensible way out. By eating his flesh, with care, she might well survive several additional weeks, perhaps until spring.

"No, Xar," she said flatly, "I won't do it."

"But why? I'm not human. My life is without genuine meaning or merit. I'm not different from — from those beasts out there."

"It's you I love, not them." It was the first time she had mentioned her love for him since the night the baby died.

He shook his head. "You cannot."

"I do."

"It's ... delirium."

"The truth."

"Nara, please."

"I'm sorry, but do you really expect me to lie about something as important as that? How can I do it? I thought I was in love with you, and the way you acted that night, when the baby died, then I knew I did. I can't eat you for dinner, like a slab of meat. Don't you realize what that would do to me?"

He fell silent, seeing the futility of further debate. Still, his own mind was firm. Whether Nara loved him or not, he would have to die in order that she might live. He could not force her to eat his flesh afterward, but at least he could offer her the chance. If there was only some way he could convince her beforehand that he was no fit object for her love. If only he could show her what he really was — an empty husk, barren of emotions, a machine of flesh, blood, and bone. Yet how? Knowing as little as he did of love, it was painfully difficult to —

He heard the door slam.

Looking up, he found that he was alone. Inside his chest a peculiar pain erupted. With a cry, he leaped to his feet.

By the time he got outside, there was no clear sign of Nara. The beasts stood in a circle in the snow, lunging and tearing at some unseen object among them. The beasts made foul, ugly grunting sounds. The claws and teeth of some were drenched red.

With a shout, Xar went at them with his bare hands. He was as strong as ten men but even then ought not to have survived. He killed at least three of the beasts and hurt several more, but in the end they drove him back into the cabin.

He was wounded, badly wounded. In the cabin, alone, as he awaited the end of winter, he nursed himself back to health. The food supply was more than adequate for his needs, but he

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nonetheless ate only sparingly.

Spring arrived with the same abruptness as winter. The deep snow melted in less than a day, leaving the exposed land a morass of brown bleached mud. Xar peered out and saw that the beasts had gone. He knew they would not return this year.

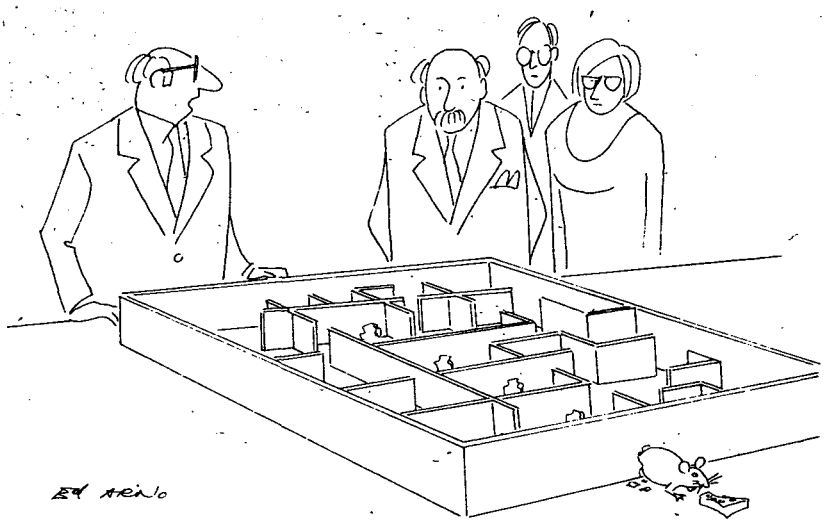
Xar stepped outside under the sun. Using his hands as shovels, he dug a deep trench in the ground. He returned to the cabin and brought out some of Nara's personal effects: the gown she had worn at night, a few trinkets of jewelry, her books. He placed these in the bottom of the trench and filled in the grave.

Barely breathing, Xar sat motionless on the damp ground. What happened next came as a shock even to him. He threw back his head and opened his mouth. For a long moment, no sound emerged.

Then he howled.

As he did, he slammed his fists against the ground and threw great clumps of mud into the air. The tears came at once. He tasted their hot salty moistness.

Xar was himself at last.



"It hurts, but I suppose we'll have to rank him 'superior'."

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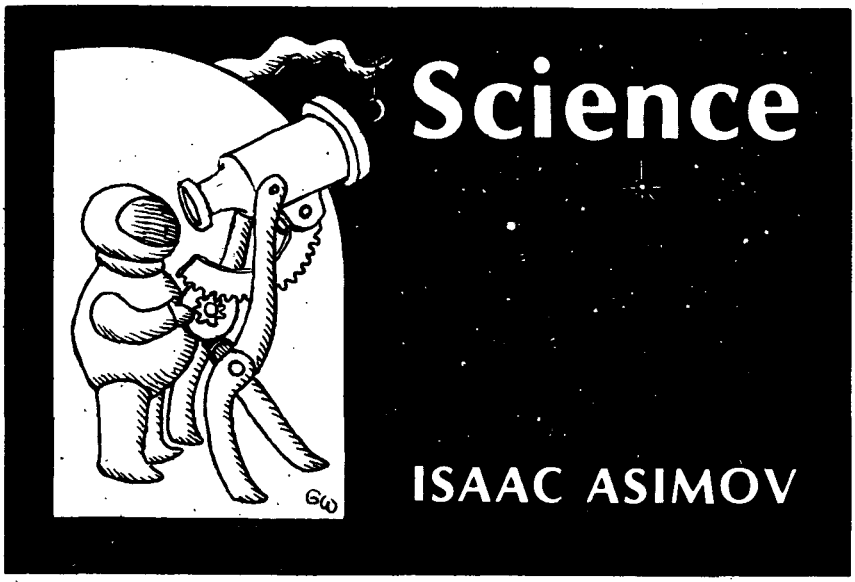

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

YES! WITH A BANG!

As a scientist, I like to think I can tell a suggestion that is scientifically untenable from one that is worth consideration, and I have no hesitation in dismissing the sort of silly stories we hear about flying saucers and Bermuda triangles and pyramid power. There's not even any excitement or interest in that.

When there are suggestions that are scientifically tenable, however, but very dramatic and out-of-the-way, then all the science fiction writer in me comes to the fore. My eyes glitter and my breath quickens. And when there are two or more competing suggestions, all of which are dramatic, then I have no hesitation usually in picking the one I prefer — which is generally the one I consider most dramatic.

A little over a year ago, for instance, I wrote about the case of the mysterious layer of iridium-rich sediment in Italy that, on being tested for age, turned out to have been laid down just at the end of the Cretaceous, some 70 million years ago, when the dinosaurs died off (see THE NOBLEST METAL OF THEM ALL, March 1980).

That seemed like too much of a coincidence; surely, there had to be a

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connection. Extraterrestrial matter, generally, is richer in iridium than the Earth's crust is because on Earth, most of the iridium collected in the core at Earth's center. Might there have been some sort of splatter of extraterrestrial matter over the Earth, and might that have killed the dinosaurs?

Supernova? Meteorite? Solar explosion?

The supernova notion seems unlikely. It would have been pretty close if it had had so drastic an effect, and there isn't really any observation in the heavens that is consistent with a huge supernova only 70 million years ago. Besides, if the iridium had been of supernovian origin it would have had an abnormal ratio of isotopes, and that ratio did not exist. In addition, there would have been plutonium-244, which would have been formed in a supernova explosion and which has a half-life long enough to have been still present in easily-detectable quantities in that layer.

The possibility of a meteorite seemed to be thrown out by the fact that there was no sign of any collision at the site at which the iridium was located. Besides (I thought) even if a meteorite hit what is now Italy, how could it devastate the Earth and kill dinosaurs thousands of kilometers away?

So I chose the solar explosion hypothesis enthusiastically. After all, what with Maunder minima (see OUT, DAMNED SPOT! March 1979) and neutrino deficiencies (see THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT, November 1979), the Sun seemed frighteningly unstable in mysterious ways. Even a small blow-off, one that would scarcely affect the Sun, would be enough to bathe us with Solar material and produce a large enough wash of heat to wreak havoc with its life-forms.

What killed off the dinosaurs, then, was not the bang of a giant star exploding, or even the smaller bang of a meteorite smashing into the Earth; what killed them was the whimper of a Solar hiccup.

I chose the Solar explanation, furthermore, because in a way it was the most frightening. While it was perfectly possible that a supernova might have exploded near us in the far past or a large meteorite might have hit us then, there is every reason to suppose that no star in our neighborhood can possibly explode during the next few million years and little reason to expect another meteoric impact.

On the other hand, with our present uncertainty concerning the nature of the Solar interior, how are we to know that there won't be another Solar hiccup tomorrow?

Well, I seem to have been wrong, I am glad to say. The possibility of a near-sterilization of the Earth tomorrow may appeal to my dramatic in-

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stincts as a fiction writer, but I don't really want it to happen in reality.

As it happens, the evidence in the last year or so has rapidly mounted in favor the meteoric hypothesis, which I had considered the least likely of the three.

I said, in my article last year, "I myself would like to see a thoroughgoing analysis of 70-million-year-old rocks in many places on Earth, for a Solar expolsion would have affected the entire surface, it seems to me."

Well, that's been done. There have been analyses done in Denmark and in other areas of Europe, also in the north Pacific and in New Zealand; and the anomalous rise in iridium occurs everywhere and always in that same layer, the one that was laid down at the end of the Cretaceous.

I had pointed out that this would be in favor of the Solar hypothesis, but, of course, it would also be in favor of the supernova hypotheses since that, too, would have affected the entire surface. What I didn't realize was that it would also support the meteoric hypothesis under certain circumstances.

I also pointed out in the earlier article that whatever the cause, "it should also have resulted in raised values for some elements other than iridium."

That, too, has been tested, and it is found that there are raised values for such metals as osmium, palladium, nickel and gold, for instance, in addition to iridium. As it happens, the relative concentration of these metals is just about that which is found in typical meteorites.

Opinion therefore began to swing markedly in favor of a meteorite impact. Since the effect seems to have been world-wide, there seems to have been an impact of a meteorite so large that it could blow itself into fine dust with such force that it would layer the whole Earth with itself and not just the region surrounding the strike. That was why there were no signs of any impact in Italy — because that is not where it happened.

And that is where I fell short. In thinking about the meteorite I had utterly failed to consider the possibility of something sufficiently large-scale. And I a science fiction writer!

What's more, I really mean large scale. In order to produce the effects it did, the meteorite would have had to be 10 kilometers across. It would not be just a meteorite. It would be an asteroid.

But where would so large an object come from?

From the space around us, of course. Such objects do exist there. So called Earth-grazers can approach disturbingly close to Earth's orbit (see

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UPDATING THE ASTEROIDS, August 1974). Most of these Earth-grazers are only a kilometer or so across, and though that would be enough to wreak havoc on the human scale, it would not be enough to bring about a near-sterilization of the planet.

There are occasional larger ones, too, however. Eros, the largest of the Earth-grazers and the first to have been discovered (in 1898), is 24 kilometers across in its longest diameter. We seem to be safe from it, though, since it's orbit is fully 22.5 million kilometers from Earth's orbit at the point of closest approach, but there may have been an Eros-like body that could come closer than that and that we're not aware of only because it no longer exists — having destroyed itself against the Earth 70 million years ago.

Yes, but any Earth-grazer with an orbit that could send it crashing into Earth would surely have done so long ago, much longer ago than 70 million years ago. Once the dangerous ones had been swept up — billions of years ago — wouldn't space be clear? Isn't that an argument against the meteorite hypothesis so short a time ago?

That is true if Earth-grazers had orbits that never altered. That, however, is not so and can't be so. An Earth-grazer inhabits the inner Solar system, and every once in a while it passes relatively close by one of the large bodies of the inner Solar System: Mars, Earth, Moon, Venus or Mercury. Each time it does so its motion must be affected by the large body's gravitational influence. The Earth-grazer is then perturbed into a new orbit, the change being a very slight one, if the distance between itself and the perturbing body is great, pronounced, if the distance is small.

(To be sure, the Earth-grazers also produce perturbations in the large bodies, but these perturbation are in inverse proportion to the relative masses, and since the large bodies are billions of times as massive as the Earth-grazers, the perturbations of those large bodies are insignificant.)

The result of the perturbations is that, over comparatively long periods of time, every Earth-grazer wanders rather widely over the inner Solar system, and sooner or later is sure to take up an orbit that intersects that of Earth.

Once that happens, a collision is bound to take place before very long, astronomically speaking, unless another perturbation moves the orbit in such a way as to make that collision impossible.

In the long run, then, not only will there be collisions, but the incidence of such collisions will not decrease markedly with time.

To be sure, every Earth-grazer that hits the Earth (or one of the other large bodies in the inner Solar system) is one Earth-grazer less. In addition,

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every once in a while an Earth-grazer is perturbed in such a way that it will adopt an orbit that will carry it out of the Solar system altogether. Balancing that, however, is the fact that an asteroid that is not an Earth-grazer is sometimes perturbed into becoming one, so that new dangers periodically arise.

Actually, Earth suffers an endless series of collisions and what saves it is the fact that virtually all the collisions are with tiny bodies. This is not because the Earth has a special affinity for tiny bodies, but only because there are more smaller bodies than larger bodies in any class of astronomical objects, and that includes Earth-grazers.

Thus, the number of dust-sized particles that hit the Earth — or at least enter its atmosphere — and float slowly downwards as meteoric dust is in the trillions per day. Those particles, with sizes up to pinheads, that are large enough to be heated to a white-hot flash but are not large enough for any part to survive the atmospheric passage and hit the ground as anything more than dust are fewer but still in the millions.

The number of objects the size of pebbles and rocks that are large enough to survive the flight through the atmosphere and reach the ground as meteorites is smaller still, perhaps one a year the world over. And of these, the larger the meteorite we're considering, the longer the interval between strikes.

An Earth-grazer 10 kilometers across might be expected to hit the Earth every 100,000,000 years on the average. (Averages are tricky things, of course, and don't represent a strict schedule. There's a tiny chance that two might hit in successive years, and a tiny chance that Earth might not have been hit at all in the course of its lifetime. The chances are, however, that once the Earth settled down, 4 billion years ago, after having swept up most of the loose matter in its orbit, it was struck some 40 times with good-sized Earth-grazers.)

I suppose astronomers had reason for thinking in this way ever since Eros was first discovered, and better reason for doing so with each passing decade as more and more Earth-grazers were discoverd, and as the orbits of those that were detected were found, in some cases, to make disturbingly close approaches to Earth's orbit.

Then, too, the sudden ending of the dinosaurs was an event sufficiently dramatic to lure some scientists into suspecting a catastrophe. There have been other episodes of "Great Dyings," but the one that took place 70 million years ago was not only the most recent, and therefore the best documented in the fossil record, but the one that involved the most spectacular

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creatures — the largest and most magnificent land animals ever to dominate the Earth.

At any rate, in 1973, without any real evidence, Harold C. Urey suggested that it was a cometary impact with the Earth that had ended the dinosaurs.

Most scientists, however tempted, did not wish to choose a catastrophic solution. For one thing they suspected that the "sudden" ending of the dinosaurs might not have been as sudden as all that. They might have died off over the space of a few hundred thousand years, and to the fossil record that might have seemed a sharp ending. In that case, it would be more fruitful, perhaps, to look for some slow change in Earth's environment which at some point set the dominoes in motion. A lowering in temperature, or a raising of ocean salinity, a draining of shallow seas, a mountain upheaval—

It was not until the coming of the iridium anomaly that the catastrophic solution began to look too good to dismiss.

But why should an Earth-grazer impact kill off the dinosaurs?

It was worse than that, in fact, for it was not only the dinosaurs that died off. Other spectacular reptiles — the plesiosaurs, the ichthyosaurs, the ptersaurs — died off simultaneously. So did the invertebrate ammonites. So did a wide variety of microscopic creatures.

How could all that have happened?

Suppose we imagine an Earth-grazer, 10 kilometers across, swooping down toward Earth. It must have made a huge flash and the great-grandfather of all thunder-claps as it struck. The noise was probably heard all over the world, and if that were so then the dinosaurs went out, yes, with a bang!

It would mean that about 1.5 trillion tons of matter was striking the Earth at a speed of about 25 kilometers per second. The enormous kinetic energy of that strike would have reduced the Earth-grazer and the surrounding regions of Earth's crust to dust and vapor and would have thrown into the stratosphere a quantity of dust equal to ten or twenty thousand times the mass of the Earth-grazer itself.

All of it would eventually have settled back to Earth, and that portion of the dust that was the Earth-grazer would have been responsible for the thin layer of greater-than-Earthly-normal concentrations of iridium, osmium, palladium and so on.

The dust, however, would not settle back immediately. It takes time.

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The volcanic explosions of Krakatoa in 1883 and of Tambora in 1815 spewed dust into the stratosphere that remained there for a couple of years in sufficient quantity to produce noticeable effects. Tambora, which produced the greater supply of dust, reflected enough Sunlight away from Earth by means of that supply to produce the "year without a summer" in 1816.

Tambora, however, delivered half a trillion tons of dust into the atmosphere at most, while the Earth-grazer strike at the end of the Cretaceous delivered at least 40,000 times that quantity. If Tambora could produce a year without a summer, what would the Earth-grazer strike do?

The estimates are that the dust produced by that enormous strike would fill the stratosphere to such an extent that Sunlight would simply not get through.

After the strike had taken place, and the atmosphere had stopped shaking with the sound, and the Earth itself had stopped ringing with the blow, and the volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis had all done their worst, there came something far more deadly still — a creeping darkness.

I don't know how long it would take the dust to spread out over the world, but suppose we consider some spot of land thousands of kilometers from the strike, and imagine some intelligent observer on the spot.

The observer would have heard the distant sound and might have been removed from any immediate consequences, but he would notice that the Sun would begin to be ruddy as it rose and would stay ruddy as it climbed higher in the sky. Each day it would rise redder and dimmer, and each day would be rather colder than the one before. And finally, one morning the Sun would not truly rise at all. There would be a dim lightening of a black sky and that would be all, day after day after day.

It is estimated that at the peak of the dust cover, perhaps no more than 1/5,000,000 of the Sun's light penetrated the dust layer so that the Earth was bathed in a diffuse light only 1/10 as bright as the full Moon. Everything else in the sky, the Moon, the planets and stars, was totally gone. And this may have continued, with slowly decreasing intensity for up to three years!

In that long winter, that long dark winter, Earth's plant world died, and because the plants died, the animal herbivores died, and because the herbivores died, the animal carnivores died. That included the dinosaurs, of course, whose end was sudden indeed, for all the flourishing lot of them must have died in the course of three years.

Of course, this new view of an Earth-grazer strike brings problems. It

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easily explains the extinction of three-quarters of the species that existed on Earth at the end of the Cretaceous. The problem is to explain how the other quarter managed to survive, even if only in greatly reduced numbers. Why wasn't the Earth utterly sterilized?

We might reason that spores, seeds and root systems lay dormant through the long dark, and then as the dust cover began to thin and the Sun's disc began to brighten and the warmth began to steal back to Earth's surface, they quickened. Plankton began to reappear in the ocean while bits of green began to touch the desolate land once more.

Little by little, the hold of plant life on the planet strengthened until the world was smiling and warm and green again — and was populated only by survivors.

There were some animals that had managed to eke out a spare living on the remnants of dead life, on seeds, on frozen carcases, and they revived, too, until the Earth was once again overrun with animal life — again survivors. The huge clumping tread of the grand dinosaurs was gone to be replaced by the scurrying patter of small mammals and the whirring flight of small birds.

It sounds good, but paleontologists are going to have to explain exactly why certain species died and other species survived and whatever scenario they devise, it is sure that someone will say: "Then why did Species A survive when it couldn't possibly have taken advantage of those methods of survival?" or "Why did Species B not survive in that case?"

Some paleontologists are so daunted by the difficulties of accounting for survival and non-survival that they don't think it can be done by anything as heavy-handed as an Earth-grazer strike and a massive dust layer in the stratosphere. They want to make use of changes that are slower, more selective, and less dramatic. In that case, though, they're not only going to have to explain the pattern of extinctions, but also that world-wide layer of iridium-high sediment.

That won't be easy, either.

But if an Earth-grazer struck the Earth 70 million years ago with enough force to send all that dust into the stratosphere, it must have left a memento behind in the form of a crater gouged out of the Earth's crust. That crater would have to be 175 kilometers (110 miles) across and have an area equal to that of the state of Rhode Island. It should be noticeable — so where is it?

To be sure, the 70 million years that have passed since the crater form-

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ed, give ample time for the action of wind, water, and life to erode it pretty much to nothingness so that it would vanish from ordinary observation. —But not entirely.

There would be left circular structures still visible from the air — a circular disruption of the rock formations, possibly a circular lake.

There are such formations here and there on Earth. The Great Meteor Crater in Arizona is the most obvious example — but it is quite small and was formed only some tens of thousands of years ago. In eastern Quebec, however, there is a circular lake-filled structure some 70 kilometers wide and perhaps 210 million years old.

If that Quebec formation can still be seen, then the strike that ended the Cretaceous, producing a circular area more than six times as great and only a third as old, should certainly be seen. Where is it?

No problem. The chances are 7 to 3 that the Earth-grazer struck the ocean, and the ocean it must have been. It went screaming through the water in a matter of seconds, with water hissing and boiling about it, and gouged out the sea-bottom sending up a cloud of water vapor along with dust and debris.

The crater, then, would be somewhere on the sea-bottom if the shifting tectonic plates of the Earth's crust have not obliterated it, and we may yet discover traces of it as we explore the sea-botton in detail. If we do find it, that would be extraordinarily good evidence in favor of the strike and also the best excuse yet to send a bathyscaphe down for a detailed study of a specific underwater formation.

Of course, a sea-strike would mean a tsunami — a huge splash of water. All the islands and continents of the world would receive that incredible wash of ocean, some more than others of course. That, too, would have contributed to the devastation of land-life and should be taken into account in reckoning extinctions.

But here I must include a speculation by my good friend, the astronomer Fred Whipple. He sent me an advance copy of a paper entitled "Where Did the Cretaceous/Tertiary Asteroid Fall?" which, at the moment of writing, has not yet been published, but will be, I hope, by the time this essay appears. (Meanwhile, I have his permission to mention its contents.)

He suggested that the Earth-grazer might have happened to strike near the junction of two of the plates that make up the crust of the Earth. He estimates that, as a result of a random strike, there is one chance in 25 that it would land within 200 kilometers of such a plate-junction. This is not a good chance, but not a very far-fetched one either.

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If a strike had been made at or near a point of junction, it would have produced a much more effective puncture of the crust, a much more prolonged period of volcanic activity, and a much greater effusion of new land surface. The new land would have wiped out any crater, but the new land itself should represent a recognizable phenomenon.

Whipple asks if there is any sizable hunk of relatively recently-formed land area sitting astride a plate-junction and points out that there is one and only one land area that seems to fit all the requirements and that is the island of Iceland, which lies astride the junction of the Eurasian and North American plates.

Whipple further points out that whereas the Italian sediments where the iridium anomaly was first detected, showed 30 times the normal values, similar analyses in Denmark showed 160 times the normal values. But then, Denmark is closer to Iceland than Italy is (even allowing for plate-movement over the last 70 million years), and we can suppose that some portions of the Earth-grazer material thrown up was in pieces large enough to settle out comparatively rapidly so that Denmark received more fall-out than Italy did. New Zealand, on the other hand, which was much farther away than Italy, has an iridium content only 20 times greater than normal.

Iceland's mere existence is an interesting point in favor of the Earth-grazer strike, and if the amount of iridium continues to decrease with distance from Iceland as more and more areas are studied, then I think it will be impossible to refute the Earth-grazer explanation of the end of the Cretaceous, along with Fred Whipple's refinement thereof.

One last point of my own. The readers of this essay series must know I am a great collector of historical coincidences (see POMPEY AND CIRCUMSTANCE, May 1971). I find it interesting, therefore, that there is mention in world literature of a winter that was three years long and that led to the end of the world as was then known and the reconstitution of a new world.

That was the Fimbulwinter ("terrible winter") spoken of in the Norse myths. It lasted three years and was the prelude to the final battle of Ragnarok between the gods and the giants in which the world as it existed was destroyed.

And what is the source of our knowledge of Fimbulwinter? Why in the writings of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) of Iceland. It follows that the tale of the mythic Fimbulwinter comes from the very place where the strike took place that started the real Fimbulwinter.

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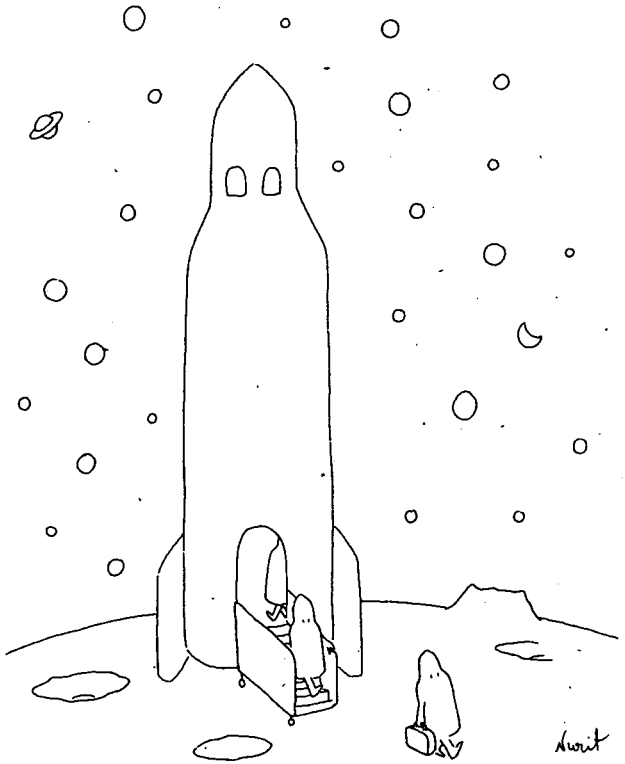
Any connection? A racial memory? Some mystic lingering?

Of course not. Not after 70 million years. There's a much more natural explanation.

Considering the climate of Scandinavia, it would be logical to suppose that the end of the world would be heralded by an unending winter. In warmer climates, a three-year drought would have been called on for the purpose.

And, as for Iceland, that happened to be, through the accident of geography, the last area of Scandinavian culture to fall under the influence of Christianity so that the pagan legends survived best there.

But it's a nice coincidence.



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Bob Leman ("Feesters In the Lake," October 1980) updates the ancient fairy tale about receiving a "reward" of three wishes and creates a most unlikely hero.

Skirmish On Bastable Street

BY

BOB LEMAN

Quite recently, in a disreputable bar on Bastable Street in this city, a wino and an elderly couple fought a brisk little skirmish with a supernatural adversary and had the good fortune to prevail. None of the three ever grasped the magnitude of their accomplishment, and indeed they soon forgot what had actually happened, but they had in truth won a laudable small victory in an ancient war, and the facts of the affair deserve to be recorded.

These facts are not verifiable, for reasons that will be obvious, and it must be admitted that many of them have something of the flavor of the bedtime stories of our youth. You are therefore quite at liberty, if you are of a skeptical or cynical turn of mind, to view the following matter as nothing more than a fairy tale. Its beginning is, after all, one of the fairy tale cliches:

Once a poor woodcutter named Garft rescued a demon from the deep hole in which it had been confined by an enchantment, and the demon had no choice but to grant him three wishes as a reward. Garft wished first for a long and happy life, and second for a painless end when at last his time came round. Then he was stumped, and he thought about it for so long that the demon became impatient and displayed its true nature by threatening to eat him there and then.

"I'll tell you what," Garft said. "I'll give the other wish to my son, Garft. How would that be?"

"Done!" said the demon, and disappeared.

Garft's calling was chopping trees, not thinking, and so it was not until much later that he realized that the demon had left no instructions about how young Garft was to avail himself of his wish. No amount of shouting

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succeeded in causing the demon to reappear, and Garft finally concluded that the problem would have to be turned over to a wiser head. Unfortunately, there was no one in the village whom Garft conceded to be wiser than himself, and he very much doubted that any neighboring village had anyone better to offer.

He mulled over the matter for a considerable time, and the seasons came and went, and then the years. He felt no urgency. Indeed, nothing affected his tranquillity and contentment. The demon had granted his wish for a happy life by the elegant expedient of making him somewhat simple-minded. No matter what misfortune befell him, he remained happy.

Because of this, his son Garft had to assume heavy responsibilities at a very early age. When he was seventeen, there was a winter of famine, and he killed one of the Earl's deer to feed his little brothers and sisters. The deer's hide was found by the Earl's men, and young Garft had to flee, an outlaw.

He fled south and west, living on what small game he could snare, until, in late summer, he found himself in a fat and prosperous countryside where the horses were enormous and the people small and dark. It was there that a petty lord elected, on a whim, to impress young Garft into his service instead of hanging him for a poacher, and a guardsman in the lord's service he remained for the rest of his life. He took a wife and had sons, and in the fullness of time he died, without ever having the wish that was his by birthright.

Now it is a fact that commerce between mortal men and supernatural creatures is regulated by a complex and immutable body of law, and that, once a bargain is struck, irresistible forces see to it that the letter of the law is fulfilled. The law holds, *stare decisis*, that the words of a contract mean what the mortal party to the contract understood them to mean. In Garft's language the word for "son" meant not only "son," but any male descendant, however remote. The third wish was there for the taking by any descendant of the woodcutter who bore the name Garft.

But young Garft's sons were named Guillaume and René, and their sons were Olivier and Robert and Jean. Jean's distant descendant Jean went to England with the Conqueror, and fathered a child upon a Saxon girl. She named the boy John, after Jean, his father. There followed many generations of villeins named John, and then one of the Johns rose in the world and acquired a little silver, and his grandson acquired a little land. In due course the Johnsons became a prosperous yeoman family in Devon.

Late in the seventeenth century a blacksheep son of the family ran off to the American colonies and settled in Boston, Massachusetts. His great-grandson Keble Johnson prospered in the rum trade and helped finance the

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War for Independence. In the nineteenth century another Keble Johnson lost most of the family fortune playing the railroad game with Jay Gould and J.P. Morgan. Just enough money remained to keep up appearances in a somewhat threadbare way and to send the eldest son to Harvard.

The money ran out in 1904, and the sixth Keble Johnson left Harvard at the end of his sophomore year, with no degree, no money, and no prospects. and no family: his father's liver had given out at about the same time as the money, and his mother died shortly thereafter. His two years of college secured him a job on the Boston *Transcript*, which he was unable to hold. He became an itinerant newspaperman, drifting westward. He ended his travels in Fowler, Illinois, where he edited *The Bedford County Chronicle*, married a local girl, and produced a son. This son grew up to manage the local creamery and cultivate a vegetable garden; he left absolutely nothing to show for his sixty years of life except his son George.

George was drafted into the army in 1940, and at the end of the war he brought back to Fowler a bride, a native of the distant northern kingdom where the woodcutter had labored centuries before. When their son was born, she selected for the child a name out of her own racial heritage; she named him Garft. And somewhere, on the boy's Christening day, an ancient record amended itself to show that there was now once more a mortal eligible to claim the outstanding wish.

George Johnson had not amounted to much before he went into the army, and after his return he was, if anything, even less useful. He worked intermittently as an auto mechanic, but most of his time was spent drinking beer at the Moose Club. When Garft was ten, his mother, having had as much as she could take of life in Fowler with George, disappeared. From that time on, Garft was largely on his own.

In high school he excelled in basketball, and upon graduation he was offered room, board, and pocket money to play for a small college in Missouri. After a semester and a half he was fired from the freshman squad, to widespread approbation. He had consistently broken training rules, had missed as many practice sessions as he had attended, and was loathed by every jock in the college. There was no possibility of his staying on as a student, as he had no more bothered to attend classes than basketball practice. He had, however, developed a circle of acquaintance among a set of hairy undergraduates with progressive political ideas and a fondness for rock music, and after his dismissal from the college he remained in the town, pretending to be a student and sponging. He felt that he was gaining an excellent education in rap sessions and was able to hold his own in conversations about Carlos Castenada and Kurt Vonnegut. He actually read most of one of the Vonnegut novels.

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He liked to think that he was part of what the press called The Ferment On Campus, and he marched and demonstrated in the spirit of the times. The community was too small for the creation of really satisfactory disorder, however, and he moved on to a larger campus in a large city, living in a confused world he saw through a haze of pills and alcohol. As the sixties wore on to their end, he drifted away from the campus skid row and into the real thing; geographically the distance was not great.

And so here we have Garft Johnson at the age of thirty-five: a full-fledged bum, a dirty and emaciated scarecrow with bad teeth and shifty eyes, who sleeps on a pile of rags in an abandoned filling station and panhandles for enough wine to keep the shakes at bay. He is wholly untrustworthy and is capable of any nastiness he can find the courage to undertake. He deserves the contempt and scorn of every right-thinking citizen. He is the contingent recipient of absolutely anything at all that he may see fit to wish for.

But contingent recipient only; obviously he cannot be granted a wish until he has made a wish, and the wish cannot be made unless the demon is present. Since calling up a demon requires the performance of a complex ritual, involving a number of intricate and disgusting procedures, the likelihood of his ever realizing his good fortune would appear to be extremely remote. Certain events, however, have been evolving in such a way that they are militating in his behalf.

The realm of the supernatural lies outside of time and separate from space, and nothing about it is in any way comprehensible to the human understanding. It is thus necessary to use analogy in talking about it, rendering discourse among its beings as if it were human speech, and referring to their milieu in mundane terms. Using this method, we will transcribe a colloquy between two such beings. One of them might be called an efficiency expert or an expeditor, and the other could be labeled a middle executive. Call their topic the Obligations Backlog. Their conversation (we will call it a conversation) is taking place in the offices of the Fulfillment Section of the Contracts Division of the Mortal Relations Department of the Temporal Affairs Branch. Smith and Jones will do for their names.

"This is really appalling," Jones said. "I can't imagine what you people have been doing. It is the responsibility of this section to keep an account of our contractual obligations to mortal beings and to devise methods of keeping within the letter of the law without actually giving anything away. My audit shows that for five thousand years or so this office has simply been pushing the tough problems to the back of the drawer. But they all remain as charges on the books, and they've had a visible effect on the bottom line. The Chief himself has been asking about it.

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He was not pleased."

Smith turned pale, and sweat appeared on his face. "I — we don't have enough help," he said. "Every demon in the place has been working his tail off. Look at the time sheets. There's not a demon that doesn't log a century of overtime every millennium."

"Time sheets indeed," Jones said. "I'll tell you what the time sheets show. They show that the contact force has been hanging around headquarters keeping warm most of the time, instead of getting out in the field and taking care of our problems. Laxity, that's what it is. Inexcusable laxity. Now listen carefully, Smith. This thing has got to be cleared up without delay. If it isn't, somebody will have a few millennia on the griddle, and I promise you it won't be me. You have one century to clear your books, and not a day more. Do I make myself clear?"

"But — " said the hapless Smith. "But — "

"One century," Jones said with finality.

There almost immediately ensued a considerable stir in the Fulfillment Section, followed by a phenomenon much resembling a cloud of bats emerging from a cave at nighfall; it was a general exodus of demons on their way to undertake cleanup operations in the material worlds. A few thousand of them had, however, been kept at headquarters for individual admonishment. These were special offenders, demons whose logs showed extraordinary numbers of lapses. One by one they were brought before Smith, were questioned, lectured, and subjected to horrible punishments; they were then sent forth to rectify their errors. It was the kind of work that Smith usually enjoyed, but on this occasion he could take no pleasure in it; the threat that hung over him was too awful.

"Name?" he said to the trembling miscreant on the carpet.

"Robinson, sir," said the demon.

"Robinson, yes. Here we are. Current assignment, Earth, so-and-so galaxy, so-and-so sector — yes. B.C. 3,000 to A.D. 3,000 — what's that mean, Robinson?"

"Local years before and after the granting of The Opportunity, sir."

"Humph. Now, let's see. What's this? What's this? Do you know how many delinquencies you have, Robinson? As the sands of the shore. Disgraceful. Inexcusable. I suppose you know the consequences."

Robinson did. He groveled and pled, but of course without result; he was subjected on the spot to the most abominable tortures. At their conclusion Smith said, "All right. Now get out there and straighten out your accounts. Otherwise, what you'll get will make what you just had seem like a delightful diversion. Understood?"

It was understood very well indeed, and Robinson departed without ceremony, disappearing from Smith's presence and instantly appearing in human form on earth. His delinquencies

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were, as Smith had pointed out, enormous in number, and he quailed at the thought of the work ahead. He was by nature indolent and slothful, and he remembered well the restful years he had spent in the hole before the officious woodchopper pulled him out. The memory of those years served to remind him that one of the items on his list was the woodchopper's third wish, and he caused himself to materialize in the city where Garft Johnson lived on skid row.

He popped into material existence on the sidewalk in front of Doyle's Shamrock Inn. Despite the establishment's name, the eponymous Doyle had been in his grave for more than forty years, and any Irish *ambience* his bar may have possessed was as dead as Doyle. Now it was the very paradigm of skid-row saloon, shabby and soiled, a place where grimy defeated men (and a few women, who were in every way equal to the men, although they did not think of themselves as liberated) protracted the drinking of a beer or a glass of popskull wine for as long as the bartender would permit, because they had no other warm place to go.

At a table at the back of the room Garft Johnson was sitting with his friend, Billy. "Friend" is perhaps not the precise word to describe their relationship, but Garft and Billy had on a number of occasions combined their dimes and quarters to raise the price of a bottle, and that would do for friendship on Bastable Street. On this day Billy was standing treat. His wife had sent word that she was on her way down to see him, and Billy found himself in need of moral support. He was weak and his wife was strong, and she was resolutely determined that Billy was going to return to a respectable life, a prospect that filled him with terror.

"I stuck it out for thirty years," he told Garft. "Thirty years of everything her way. Move to town so's we could have plumbing. Then move up here so's I could work in the tire factory. Then nags at me to try and make foreman. Thirty years. I ain't ambitious, Garfty. I would of been happy back there in Goster County, huntin' a mite, fishin' a mite, work once in a while at the canning factory if I needed a little cash money. Hell, I could of got on welfare with no sweat. But that there woman give me no peace, Garfty, no peace at all. So when I got my pension I says, 'I got to get me some peace, Lurlene. Let me take a hundert dollars a month,' I says, 'and you take the rest.' And I come down here, and it's peaceable. Except when she comes down to rescue me."

"Ah, screw her, Billy," Garft said. "Let's have another drink."

"Yeah, sure, Garfty," Billy said. "Hold my seat, I'll get 'em." He took the glasses to the bar for refills. Billy was not an alcoholic. He lived on skid row because he liked it. For thirty years he had hated almost every moment of his life; he disliked respectability, he resented keeping up appearances, he loathed responsibility. Here on

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Bastable Street, there were none of these. His hundred a month paid for his room and he worked as a casual from time to time for food and wine money. He drank the wine not out of need, but to be companionable. He was happy — or at any rate contented.

"Except for that damn woman," he said. "Keeps comin' down here, ever six months or so, hollers at me to come on home. Why, Lordamercy, Garfty, I can't live in that house no more. She's turned neat in her old age, keeps house like a demon. You drop anything on the floor, she screeches like a sireen. She's a witch, y'know."

"Yeah," Garft said. "They all are."

"No, I mean a real witch, knows spells and words of power. She's a Poecock, and all the women's witches in that tribe. Mother to daughter, ever since fur back."

"You believe that crap, Billy?"

"Can't say I believe it all, but there's something to it, all right. I seen her take off many a wart, and dry up cows, when we still lived up the valley. Them Poecocks been unto themselves on that ridge of theirn for anyhow two hundert years, moonshinin' and marryin' each other. They know some things. She's got a spell on me right now, tryin' to toll me home."

"Aw, come on, Billy," Garft said.

"It's a fact. It ain't much of a spell, Lord knows, for I've no intent of goin'. But I can feel the pull. Here she is, now."

Like a dumpy tugboat puffing through garbage-laden waters, Lurlene was advancing toward them, utterly oblivious of the disgruntled winos who muttered darkly in her wake. Wheezing, she sat down at the table. "Lordamercy," she said. "This street looks worse ever time I see it. Billy, get me a beer."

"This here's my friend, Garft," Billy said.

"Hoddy. Billy, get me that beer, will you?"

Billy went to the bar. Lurlene said to Garft, "He brought you to argue on his side, did he?"

Argument was the last thing Garft wanted. He was at the pleasantest point of the day's drinking, with his nerves calm and an easeful euphoria settling in. If nothing disturbing occurred, he might maintain this desirable state for several hours; but if strife or discord impinged upon his woolly contentment, he would instantly be plunged into quite another state of mind, a touchy, resentful irritation that was likely at any moment to turn to noisy, impotent rage. This would be followed by a deep depression, which ended only when he had drunk himself unconscious. These latter stages were not pleasant, and he liked to delay them for as long as possible. He by no means wanted an argument.

"Nah, Lurlene," he said. "I'm on your side. You're right. Billy don't belong down here." Only a few minutes previously he had been telling Billy that it was unreasonable of Lurlene to

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insist that he go home.

Billy came back with Lurlene's beer. "How about you drink this before we start, Lurlene," he said. "Let's be restful for a little." They sat and drank in a surprisingly companionable silence.

It was at this point that Robinson entered, creating something of a stir among the winos. He had not chosen wisely in selecting a model for his human appearance and costume. It is well known that demons have certain deficiencies in taste and intelligence, and it must be admitted that he was badly out of touch with twentieth-century Earth. So his error is perhaps understandable; but if his guise had been deliberately calculated to arouse suspicion and distrust in the human heart, it could not have been more successful. He was sharp, he was sleek: he was padded at the shoulders and pinched at the waist, he wore a tight vest and no tie, his shoes were square at the toe and lifted at the heel. Large gems flashed on his fingers, chains clinked on his wrists. The gaudy trendiness of the costume was, however, belied by his grooming: in an era of Pancho Villa mustaches and fluffy hair sprayed with fixative, he wore a thin black line on his upper lip, and his hair was greased down to a black shine. He carried himself with a sort of furtive jauntiness; he reeked fraudulence as an athlete reeks sweat.

The type was not unknown on Bastable Street, and the winos watched him with a mixture of disdain and fear. There was a faint collective sigh of relief when they saw that his destination was Billy's table, that he had no interest in them. They returned their attention to their glasses.

Robinson pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. "Hi, there, Garft," he said. "Lurlene. Billy."

"Oh, hi," Garft said. Billy said, suspiciously, "You know him, Garft?"

Garft made a vague noise. Robinson said, "He don't know me yet, but I got something for him."

No one in Doyle's had ever heard the caveat concerning Greeks bearing gifts, but every denizen of Bastable Street knew its meaning instinctively. All three pairs of eyes fixed themselves upon Robinson in deepest suspicion. He said, "Now I got to explain this like in detail. It's the law. I got to make you understand that this is for real. 'Cause it's going to seem like, you know, magic. And it is. Magic. But it's real."

If he had said that fire is hot or water is wet, he would have been unpersuasive. Garft said, "Look, buddy, we don't want any. We got things to talk about here. Private."

Lurlene sniffed at the air. She said, "There's something — I smell something."

"Well, sure," Billy said. "Naturally. You're in Doyle's."

"No, not that. Something wicked. Brimstone. I smell evil."

"Ah, witch stuff," Billy said.

Robinson shot a swift, covert glance

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at Lurlene. Something very ugly stared out of his eyes for a moment and then was gone. He said to Garft, "Listen, Garft, you got something coming to you. I brought it."

"Let's see it, then."

"Why, it ain't something I can lay on the table. What it is, is a wish."

"Brimstone!" cried Lurlene. "Garft, be careful!"

"What you talking about, Lurlene?" Billy said.

"I smell hellfire. Garft, don't talk to him!"

"Oh, stop it, Lurlene," Billy said, and then, to Robinson: "What you mean, a wish?"

"Just what I said. He gets one wish to come true. I can do that."

"Wow, great!" Garft said. "I wish I had the whole bottle here on the table, instead of doing this one drink at a time."

"That's what I mean," Robinson said. "You got to understand that it's all real when you make your wish, or it don't work. You got to know what you're doing."

"Ah, come on," Garft said. "What's the scam?" He could feel cracks developing in his carapace of well-being, could feel acid drops of irritation dripping in through the cracks.

"No scam," Robinson said. "Your forty-times-great grandfather was granted three wishes, and only took two. You get the other one."

"Yeah, sure. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"I know him for sure, Garft," Lurlene said. "An imp of Satan. Lord Jesus, save us!"

"Shut up, old woman!" Robinson said, viciously.

Billy stirred uneasily. "Hey!" he said with weak indignation. "Watch how you talk, there."

Robinson ignored him. He said, "Okay, Garft. Watch right here." He pointed with his finger. In front of Garft on the table there was sudenly a snifter glass of delicate crystal, holding an inch of fluid.

Garft gave a startled twitch. "What — ? How'd you do that?" he said. His voice was strained. His euphoria had wholly evaporated now, and his nerves were tuning themselves up for a bravura performance.

"I'm showing you I can do what I say," Robinson said. "Something you'll appreciate. Go ahead, drink it. You look like you could use it."

Garft shakily lifted the snifter. It contained three ounces of century-old *fine champagne*, a Cognac of such perfection and grandeur that it might have been the Platonic ideal of brandy. It was the distillation into amber droplets of a splendid summer long ago, so great and noble a Cognac that a connoisseur might have wept in gratitude upon inhaling its bouquet. Garft knocked it back in a single greedy swallow.

A second later he made a strangled sound, snatched up Lurlene's beer, and gulped noisily. "Whoo!" he said. "It's booze. I thought it was wine. What the

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hell *is* that stuff?" He looked suspiciously at Robinson. "You trying to poison me or something?"

Demons are not known for patience. For a moment the sulfurous smell became very strong. Lurlene made signs with her fingers and began to mumble. Robinson said, "You believe now I got the power to do it?"

"It's a good trick. Where was it, up your sleeve?"

"Up my sleeve, you lousy halfwit? Up my sleeve? It's magic, you putrid lump, magic. Can you understand that? You *will* understand that. You'll understand that, all right."

"Hey," said Garft. "I mean, hey, don't go calling no names. Nobody ast you to sit down here." He was by this time fully into stage two, full of resentment at the whole world and ripe for a quarrel. He was considerably intimidated by Robinson, but prepared to be belligerent until the altercation showed signs of graduating to a physical level. "Why don't you just get out of here?" he said. "We had about enough of you. Calling names. Goddamn street sharpy."

Robinson lost his temper entirely. It was not pleasant. Those traits which we hold to be most discreditable in a human being constitute a demon's entire personality, and the essential nastiness is in him never diluted by a decent impulse or a moral qualm. His is no proud and majestic wickedness; there is no Miltonic grandeur in him. It is not he, but his master who directs those enormous engines of evil that periodically afflict mortal beings; it is not he, but Milton's Satan (or something very like him) who inspires the great monsters, the Stalins and Maos and Hitlers. Robinson and his peers are otherwise. Theirs is a soiled and greasy wickedness, a wickedness of sly small peculations and furtive perversions, of gratuitous cruelties to the innocent, of moral cowardice and petulant selfishness, of willful squalor and mindless cynicism.

Such a being in a fit of rage evokes in bystanders approximately equal proportions of fear and disgust. It seemed to the three at the table that the atmosphere had suddenly taken on a dead, iron chill and an appalling fecal stench; a dreary sense of hopelessness and despair washed over them. They became aware that somewhere behind Robinson's ferretty sharpster's face was something toothed and purplish that squirmed and heaved.

Garft's belligerence vanished instantly. "Take it easy, buddy," he said, apprehensively. "Take it easy. No need to get mad. That's just the way I talk, y'know?"

Lurlene was made of sterner stuff. Terror and nausea chased each other across her face, and then there was a firming of her jaw. She took a deep breath and began to chant:

"By *Bee*vil and *Ash*kob and *Gnul*:
Git *back* in yer *hole*, beast.
Back whur ye *come* from.
Stay thar till *doom*sday,
Or *some*one sends *res*cue."

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All parties, including Robinson, gaped at her. Garft recovered first. "Goddamnit, Lurlene," he said, "don't get his goat any worse!"

Lurlene did not answer. She was staring at Robinson, the hopeful expression she had worn for a moment slowly fading from her face. Robinson smirked. "Whatta you know," he said. "The old girl thought she knew a spell. Make you feel better, grandma?"

Billy said, nervously, "What in blazes was you doing, Lurlene?"

"What he said. Casting a spell. I didn't really reckon it would work. but we got to do *something*."

"Now where'd you of got a spell for a creature like this, anyhow? Course it didn't work. What the world was it?"

Lurlene looked embarrassed. "Well," she said, "it's for mice, really. Or rats or snakes. Maybe as big as groundhogs. Things in holes. It's all I could think of."

Robinson let out a bray of laughter. "Yeah, mice are about your speed, grandma. And it wouldn't even have worked with mice. You got the names all wrong." His expression became menacing again, and he turned to Garft. "All right, you slob," he said. "I've wasted about enough time here. *Now you make your lousy wish.*"

There was something monstrously offensive in his manner, something that went even beyond the offensiveness of the words. He was a bully, and a rather stupid one, but his power over his present company was an undeniable fact, and there was, behind the bullying, a cold, sneering arrogance. Only someone of saintly disposition could have remained unaffected. There were no saints in Doyle's.

No saints, and, to be blunt, not even standard human beings. Except perhaps for Billy, every habitue of Doyle's was in some degree deficient in those qualities that make it possible for the human race to cope with the world. These people had opted out. They had elected not to try any longer, and in making that election they had outraged some basic part of their natures. Uncountable generations of our ancestors were shaped by the unforgiving iron imperatives of ecology, and our genes know, even when our minds do not, that failure to try is death. Deep in their hearts the people in Doyle's despised themselves, and their self-contempt made them in fact contemptible.

Thus Garft's behavior cannot be called courageous; it was not even the desperate valor of the cornered rat. It was, rather, simple failure to curb an access of spite and malice toward this creature who had had the effrontery to take him at his own evaluation. He was shaken by impotent rage, and for a brief moment his need to strike out at someone or something overrode his pusillanimity. But — all this having been said — he did, in the event, stand up to and prevail over a most repulsive and unquestionably powerful agent of darkness, and for that he deserves

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praise and thanks.

He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet, this unlikely David, sweating under his layers of ragged sweaters, trembling with equal parts of fear and rage, desperately winnowing his exiguous vocabulary for words that would flay and sear. The words simply were not there. It did not cross his mind that a gentle benediction might have caused Robinson at least a little discomfort, while the trite scatological and sexual imagery that made up his best effort at scathing words was, from Robinson's point of view, mild praise. He squeaked out his obscenities while Robinson grinned and his frustration grew, until at last Robinson said, "Okay, turkey, you've had your fun. Now make your wish. *Now*."

"My wish?" Garft said in a strangled voice. "My wish? I'll tell you my wish, you creepy little rat. I wish —" He stopped. He had nothing in mind except that he desperately wanted something very bad to happen to Robinson. There was, at that point, a distinct possibility that he might say, "I wish you'd go to hell" — or words to that effect. If he had done so, Robinson's mission would have been instantly and neatly completed: the wish would have been granted without actual benefit to Garft, and Robinson would have been back at headquarters to receive whatever plaudits are awarded by the likes of Smith and Jones.

But if that was Robinson's plan, it failed. The word "rat," which Garft had hurled only as a stock term of opprobrium, without thought of its literal meaning, had bred a sluggish activity in his brain, and he remembered Lurlene's abortive exorcism.

"You want my wish, I'll give you my wish, you — you lousy rat," he said. "I wish Lurlene's dumb poem worked, that's what I wish!"

And of course Robinson disappeared.

There was for a little time a bemused silence at the table. At length Lurlene said, "Kind of an ugly fella."

Billy nodded "Yeah. Sure was. Glad he's gone. You want a drink, Garft?"

"Sure do, Billy. Say, what did that guy want, anyhow?"

The other two looked puzzled. The encounter was rapidly fading from all three memories, as invariably happens after such events.

"Why — I think he said he'd buy a drink," Billy said. "He never did, though. I'll do it." He went to the bar for the drinks, and all was as usual in Doyle's, and with that we reach the end of our fairy tale.

The question will of course be asked: Did they all live happily ever after? There is no answer at this time, because these things happened only recently. One can perhaps predict happiness — or at least reasonable contentment — for Lurlene and Billy. That was their state before they met Robinson, and there is no reason to think that anything may change for them. As

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for Garft, one would like to hope that some residual memory of his heroism lodged in his subconscious and will serve to spark a renascence of spirit in him, so that he will take a bath and find a job and perhaps have his teeth seen to. Such a beginning might lead him into the paths of productive respectability, where he would end with a wife and children and a lawn to rake. On the other hand (and this is no doubt more likely), he may simply continue his present life, which does, after all, bring him happiness of a kind. If he had thoughtfully considered his wish, instead of squandering it in a fit of temper, his highest aspiration would have been to spend the rest of his life in the condition we have described as stage one of his drinking day. It is probably safe to say that Garft will live happily for two or three hours of each day, and not so happily the rest of the time.

Last of all, Robinson. We know what happened to him. At the instant the wish was uttered he found himself, without any sense of transition, at the bottom of a deep hole in a cold northern land. He did not even make an attempt to get out. He was well aware of where he was, and how he had come to be there, and he was resigned to his imprisonment. He knew that he was going to be there for nine hundred and forty years. At the end of that time a poor woodcutter named Garft was going to find the hole and pull him out, and he would have to grant the woodcutter three wishes as a reward.

Coming Soon

Next month: "Werewind," by **J. Michael Reaves,** a gripping Hollywood fantasy about a Santa Ana windstorm and a killer. **Stephen King** will also be on hand with "The Slow Mutants," the longest and latest in his series of Gunslinger stories. Soon: New stories by Pamela Sargent, Jane Yolen, Lisa Tuttle, Joanna Russ, Keith Roberts, James Tiptree, Jr., Gene Wolfe, John Brunner, Richard Cowper, John Varley, Avram Davidson and many others.

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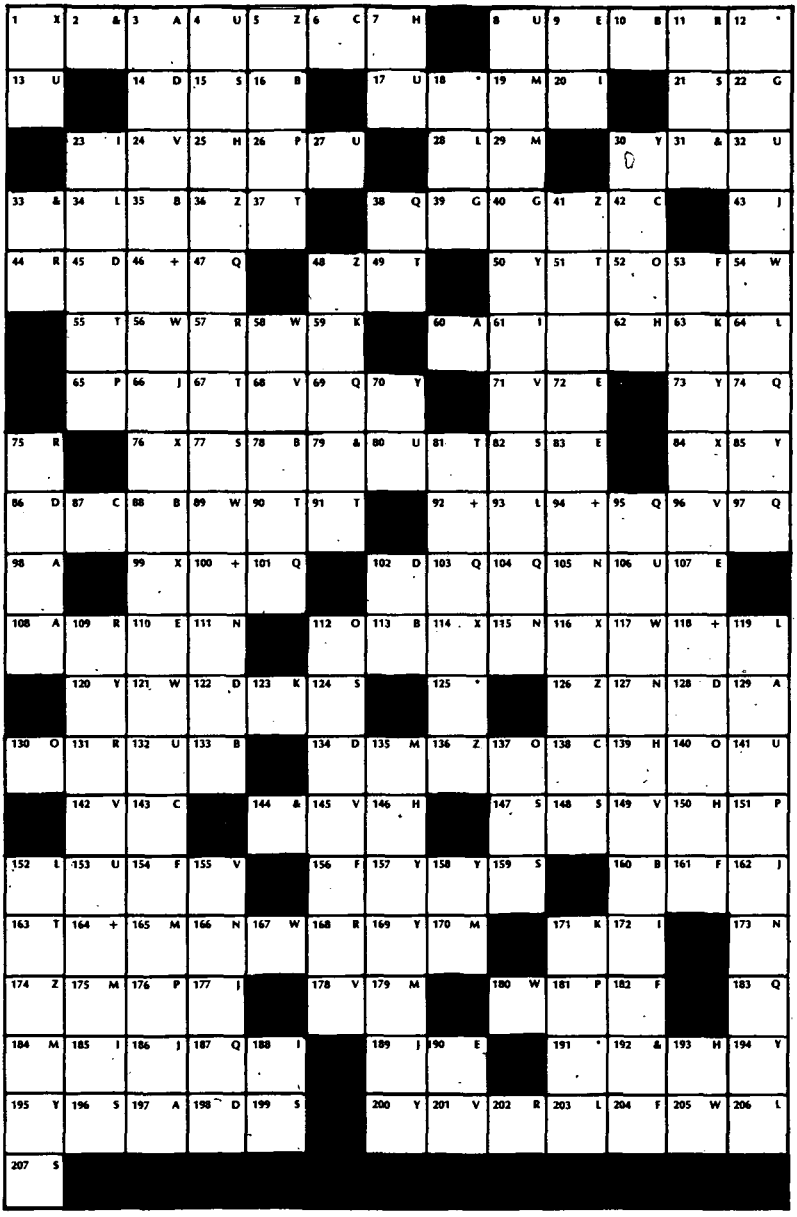

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Acrostic Puzzle

by Rachel Cosgrove Payes

This puzzle contains a quotation from a science fiction story. First, guess the clues and write the word in the numbered blanks beside the clues. Put these letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of the line is not necessarily the end of a word. Words end with black squares.) If your clue words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. If you can guess some of these words, put the letters into the blanks for the clues, over the appropriate numbers. This will help to guess more words. The first letters of the correctly worked clues spell the name of the author and the title of the sf work from which the quotation is taken.

Story by Dean Ing.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
108 197 98 3 129 60

Wrote WHAT ENTROPY MEANS TO ME

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
78 10 160 88 113 133 16 35

Mr. and Mrs.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___
6 143 138 87 42

Wrote THE SWORD OF RHIANNON.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
102 198 86 134 45 128 122 14

Wrote THE CASTLE KEEPS.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
9 190 72 110 83 107

Writers use many.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
204 53 156 182 161 154

What golfer does not shout.

___ ___ ___
39 22 40

What sf writer tries to do to income.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
139 25 7 193 146 150 62

Placed one within another.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
61 172 23 20 188 185

Fated.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
186 162 189 43 66 177

Part of first telegraph message

___ ___ ___ ___
63 123 59 171

Extent Upward.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
28 152 206 203 34 93 119 64

Arachnid writer.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
19 175 165 184 179 170 135 29

Native American dwellings.

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
127 166 115 105 111 173

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O. Itty bitty bits.

112	137	52	130	140

P. Angular cut.

26	176	151	65	181

Q. SF writer/artist duo.

69	183	47	74	38	104	187	95	97	103

101

R. What sf readers should be.

109	131	202	75	168	44	11	57

S. Theme of THE WOLF OF SALEM.

124	207	82	148	159	196	15	77	21	147

199

T. THE ____ ABROAD.

55	81	67	163	37	49	90	51	91

U. Combines into complex whole.

17	13	132	141	106	32	8	80	4	153

27

V. Designating bony elements of internal ear.

71	96	149	155	142	145	24	68	178	201

W. Authenticated.

56	89	180	167	58	205	117	121	54

X. Wrote STOLEN FACES.

1	116	84	99	114	76

Y. Pointed out.

70	194	120	157	195	50	85	158	200	73

30	169

Z. Starting from scratch.

5	174	41	48	36	136	126

+. Wrote CONJURE WIFE.

94	46	100	92	118	164

*. Soil.

12	18	125	191

&. Mysterious.

192	33	79	2	31	144

Answer will appear in July issue.

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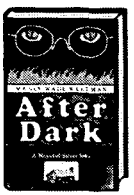

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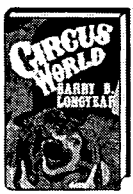

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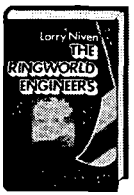

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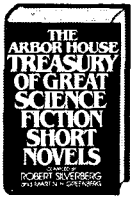

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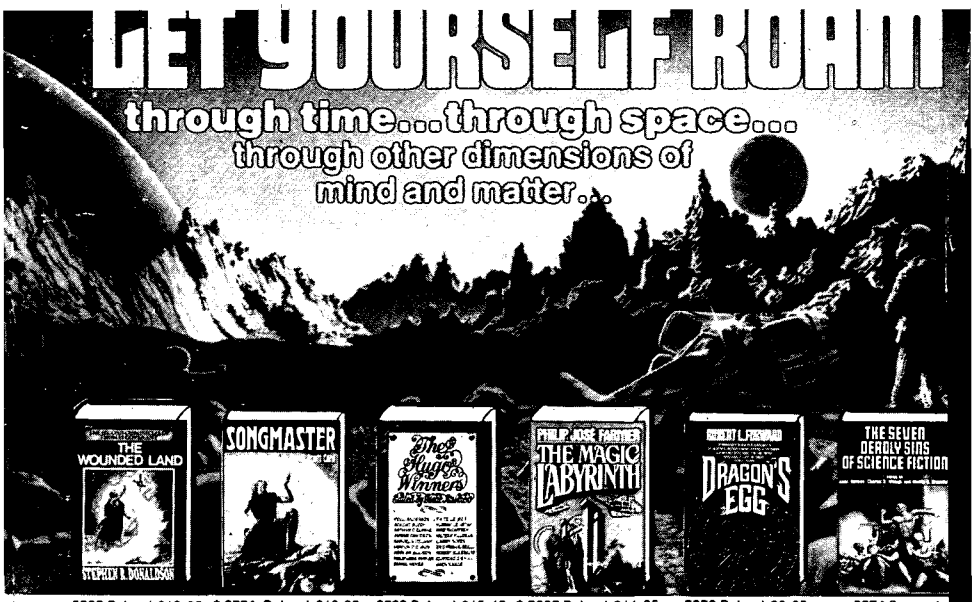

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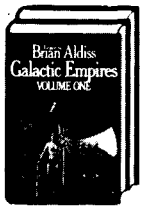

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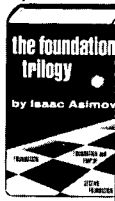

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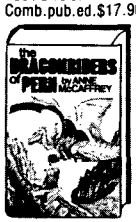

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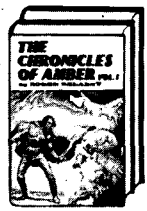

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